Chapter 1

Half a month after the emperor's operation finished with no mishap, Maomao settled back into a workflow that consisted of half her usual work and half dosage experiments. A high-ranking court physician had taken over the emperor's post-operative treatment. Although the scale of the dosage experiments have been reduced, the fact that they were keeping on with it was probably in the anticipation that it would prove useful here on after.

With the seasons getting colder, she also changed her medical robes to something thicker. The bedding for the patients in the town clinic would be supplemented with something a little thicker too.

"Wanwan-senpai, are the medicines for restocking okay here?"

Maomao passed the account book to the tall senior, otherwise known as Wanwan-senpai.

"It's fine. For some reason I feel like you've been excessively calling me by my name lately."

"Is that so?"

"Also, I feel like the way you're pronouncing it is a little peculiar."

"Could it be your imagination?"

Wanwan. Written as Wang Wang.

It was a name that Maomao, who was bad at remembering names, was super thankful for. It can't be helped she pronounced it with fondness in her tone.

"Alright, now place the order of medicine for me," he said.

"Understood. Also, I will be returning to the imperial court this afternoon. Is there anything you want me to take care of?"

"Mmm. Nothing for now. Now that you mention it, you're checking the medicine room today, right?"

Wanwan-senpai checked the medicine stock inventory as Maomao did, so he knew whose turn it was.

"Yes."

"Then, if Tianyu is in the area, get a rise out of him for me."

“For sure.” Maomao replied, head held high.

Tianyu was the one who made the biggest mess during the emperor’s surgery, which had been a terrible challenge. It would have been fine if his blunder was from extreme stress, but in his case, it was for his personal reasons, so he had no grounds for extenuating circumstances. Tianyu was the one at fault for bringing personal interest into a job that concerned the life of the emperor. Rather, the fact that he didn’t lose his head over this was an act of clemency.

He received quite the pay cut, but the remainder was a freeloader’s food expenses, so you could say that he was unpaid.

And so, Tianyu will be working without pay for the time being. Not only that, he was now punished with every single court physician out to drive him crazy.

Even if they did get a rise from him, Tianyu was aloof by nature. Getting Tianyu to feel vexed became the biggest thing among the court physicians.

Whether it would be called bullying or not…

Far from getting discouraged, the person himself was even having a great time.

And so, Maomao returned to the imperial court.

Her junior Yo was in the medicine room. She would replenish the stock when Maomao and the others were away.

“Maomao-san, I just replenished the stock, so check, please.”

“Okay.”

The clever junior diligently learnt the fundamentals. Furthermore, she wasn’t conceited and would wash the bandages and sheets and disinfect the tools.

It’s wonderful that she does the fundamentals properly.

No matter how clever they were, if they don’t listen to people, they were of bad character. And then a person of bad character showed up.

“Hey, Niangniang and Yo. In the middle of work?”

It was Tianyu.

Maomao thought about ignoring him, but she remembered what Wanwan-senpai told her. “Yes, Tianyu-san. Your cheeks are gaunt. Have you been eating properly?”

“Yes. I’ve had food from Court Physician Liu’s place.”

Court Physician Liu, thinking that he couldn’t let Tianyu run loose, took on the responsibility to feed him, but as expected, he was impossible to tame.

Even Maomao knew very well that agitating Tianyu would be difficult. Which is why she used a special tool.

“Is that so?” Maomao took out a large basket. Inside the basket was…

“M-my word!”

A large chicken. It has been decapitated, feathers plucked and blood drained. It was a spent hen that couldn’t lay eggs anymore, not a young chicken, but that was why it would have good flavour. It would be very delicious simmered well into a thick soup with an addition of egg and kudzu powder.

Maomao, who often went into town for work, had been entrusted with buying supper as well. If she made soup in the medical office and brought it back, the court physicians would be grateful to her and she would also save on dinner expenses–one stone two birds.

However, it wasn’t the soup that Tianyu was jumping at.

“Ahhhh, I beg you. Please, Niangniang. Can’t you let me dismantle that chicken?” Hands dramatically on his cheeks, his normally dull fish-like eyes were sparkling.

Court Physician Liu understood. A pay cut alone wouldn’t make Tianyu repent.

The thing that would distress this guy would be…

Not letting Tianyu do his favourite dissections.

He messed up on the surgery, so for the time being, he was banned from surgeries. Not only that, he wasn’t allowed to dissect dead bodies or dismantle animals.

He had no money, so he couldn’t buy meat from the markets either.

Occasionally, when his withdrawal symptoms arose, they would just give him a bullfrog.

“Ahhh, I beg you. I’ll process it well, so let me dismantle iiit.”

“No way.” Normally, she would save time and let him do it, but today she will continue to tease him. “Ahhh, come to think of it. I need water. I’ll have to fill up this water jug.”

“Yes, I’ll do it for you. Please, I beg youuu.”

After teasing him, he drew water and did the laundry for her.

As work finished early, Maomao did side jobs in the medical office. Yo did the same. She sat down next to Maomao and rolled up the washed bandages.

In the next room, Tianyu, who had finally acquired the chicken to dismantle, displayed his magnificent knife skills. He followed the muscle and divided it up.

“I’ll be using the thigh meat for stir-fry, so please cut it into bite-sized pieces. Please boil the bones in the pot together with spring onion.”

“Okaaay.”

Maomao will do the seasoning. Her colleague En’en was better at cooking, but she wasn’t here today, so it can’t be helped.

“Is this fine? Didn’t Court Physician Liu put a stop to it?” Yo whispered to Maomao.

“If you don’t give him bait once in a while, he would try to dismantle a nearby person sooner or later, wouldn’t he?”

“…There’s no way.”

No, he will.

Tianyu was this dangerous. Hence why you need to know how to take control of his reins.

“Please remove the scum properly,” she said.

“Got it,” he said.

While such an exchange occurred, the old court physician showed up. “Oh, what is today’s supper?”

“It’s egg drop soup,” Maomao said.

“Oh hoh. You want wood ear mushroom?”

“Please give me if you have.”

The old court physician took out a dried black item from the medicine box. This shrewd court physician purchased herbal medicine that can be used as condiments or ingredients. His excuse was that maintaining the health of court physicians was also a splendid job.

While Maomao reconstituted the wood ear in hot water, she added wine and salt and then seasoned it.

The chicken stir-fry was haphazardly made with whatever vegetable was available.

“Court Physician-sama. Can we cultivate a field?” Maomao asked the old court physician.

Maomao wanted to cook with freshly picked herbs like green spring onions and garlic chives. And if possible, she also wanted to grow a lot of herbal medicines.

“No can do. There was a case before where a court lady who had been entrusted to manage the field made a blunder.”

“You’re right,” she said.

He was talking about Suirei. Having plotted Jinshi’s assassination, she was now not allowed to exist.

As the old court physician’s nose twitched, he read a note.

“The child over there is Yo, correct?”

“Yes,” Maomao said.

“…hm, can you come over for a moment?”

“What is it?” Yo asked.

He showed Yo, not Maomao, the journal. Curious, Maomao also came over.

The note was from a court physician working in another region.

“…This is.” Yo’s complexion changed.

“Yeah, things might be getting a little scary.”

In the note, it was written that there has been an increase in patients who were breaking out in blisters.

Chapter 2

It was a few days after the old court physician called Yo away for a business trip.

“Why is it Yo?” Court Physician Ri, whose muscles improve by the year, said.

“I wouldn’t know the answer to that.” Wanwan-senpai tilted his head as he sipped his tea.

Court Physician Ri and Wanwan-senpai seem to be from the same cohort–they often chat whenever they see each other. Today they were drinking tea, as their breaks were also aligned. Maomao, being the subordinate, prepared the tea.

“Does Maomao know anything?”

I do.

However, when Maomao thought about Yo, she wondered if she should mention it. Then again, Court Physician Ri and Wanwan-senpai were both outstanding court physicians in terms of personality. Above all, the moment Yo got called away, people would find out about it sooner or later, so Maomao thought and opened her mouth.

“Yo has contracted smallpox before. We got a message a few days ago from elsewhere about what seems to be smallpox patients being brought in, so could that be why Court Physician-sama picked Yo?

“Smallpox, huh? If that’s the case…”

“I’ve never contracted it either. Smallpox.”

Smallpox was difficult to catch a second time. It was a fundamental fact taught in medical studies.

“But could it truly be smallpox?”

“If it’s just chicken pox, it should be fine. But I believe he brought Yo along just in case,” Maomao said.

No medicine works for smallpox. It might just be that it hasn’t been discovered yet, but it would probably be impossible for Maomao to find it now. So Maomao would only get in the way even if she came along, rather, the chances of her catching it would be high.

Maomao brought out steamed sweet potato with the tea.

“S-sweet potato, huh?”

“It’s sweet potato.”

Court Physician Ri and Wanwan-senpai’s reactions towards the sweet potato were due to their difference in experience with the food scarcity in the Western capital.

“I received the sweet potatoes from Rahan’s older brother. Rahan’s father is the grower,” Maomao said.

“A new Rahan type appeared,” Court Physician Ri said.

“Heyy, who is this Rahan? Does he have a mother and an older sister too?” Wanwan-senpai asked.

They ate the sweet potato as they gave their respective responses.

“It would be much sweeter if we let it sit in a cold dark place for a bit longer, but honestly, they gave me way too much it’s a hindrance so I’m giving it to you to eat quickly,” Maomao said.

“Can’t you process it? If there’s not enough hands, use Tianyu.” Court Physician Ri went to rummage through the shelves to see if there was any condiment to go with the steamed sweet potatoes. In the Western capital, many ate it with butter.

“Please send someone more useful. He will only work seriously when it comes to dismantling livestock.”

Rather, that was the only thing he could be used for.

“More importantly, isn’t it unfair that he only gets to be punished with a pay cut and bullying?” she asked.

“Ahh, you didn’t know?” Wanwan-senpai said as he peeled the skin off a sweet potato. “Tianyu got sentenced to whipping.”

“…Really? I didn’t hear of it. He’s energetic, considering.” Maomao grimaced.

“Court Physician Liu proposed to have one hundred whips divided into ten whips each time. It seems people commonly die in the middle of a hundred consecutive whips. So, to carry out the punishment, and so that it wouldn’t get in the way of work, it got adjusted.”

“So they’re carrying it out in a way not to kill him nor make him live, I see.”

“Yeah, but that guy won’t have it play out with just that. He recorded down the location of the whip strikes and the intensity of the pain.”

“It’s not a good thing, but I want to see the records.”

“You can pester Court Physician Liu for that.”

The break time came to an end while they were chatting. Court Physician Ri and Wanwan-sempai helped her to clear away the tea utensils, so Maomao liked them both.

The court physicians’ break times were staggered with the military officers’ break times, so when Maomao’s group finished their break, military officers injured from training showed up.

“Yes, where did he get hurt?”

“He was hit hard on the head while sparring.” The military officer who came as the chaperone answered on behalf of the downed military officer. No, his attire was a military officer’s but he was awfully slender.

His face looks familiar?

Maomao tilted her head, and the other side responded.

“It’s been a while, Maomao-sama.”

“…Ah.”

It was Ujun, former high-ranking consort Lishu’s older half-brother. This excessively humble man was a hanger-on among the military officials as usual.

Ujun explained the injured person’s condition, put down their needed belongings, and then left.

Come to think of it, how are Lishu and Basen?

Such a thought came to mind, but it wasn’t related to Maomao, so she decided to focus on work.

The question regarding how Basen was, was soon cleared up.

“Hey, hey, Maomao-san, Maomao-san, please wake uuup.”

Ruining the court physician assistant's important day off was the person with a characteristic voice that couldn't be forgotten after hearing it once.

"What is it, Chue-san?"

The owner of tanned skin and a dango-like nose had climbed on top of Maomao. "Fufufufu, it's your long-awaited day off, so Chue-san wondered if Maomao-san wanted to take a stroll through town, and came over."

"Putting aside my question of why Chue-san is aware of my day off, what are you plotting by suddenly barging in to have me go out?" Maomao asked.

"No way. Chue-san isn't that much of a schemer. It's just that the daughter-in-law of the Ma clan…cannot go against the authorities of the Ma clan, that is my mother-in-law and my sister-in-law Mamei-san."

Maomao considered it. What could have her mother-in-law Taomei and Mamei involved and have Chue coming here in high spirits? "Did something happen to, say, Basen-sama?"

"H-how did you know?!" Chue was dramatically taken aback.

Maomao couldn't quite say that she got along with the man known as Basen, but she had quite some sympathy for him. "Are you going to spy on Basen-sama's something?"

"No, this is my brother-in-law, you see. He was oddly nervous, but turns out he's heading for Lishu-sama's temple today. He said it was for work, but I felt the waves of incoming romance, so I'm here to invite Maomao-san who is bound to be dying to idle the day away."

"I'm not idling. It's necessary sleep." Maomao sullenly got up and started to change clothes.

"It's a bit cold, so please have this outerwear," Chue said.

"Who does this belong to?"

"Disappointingly, it's not from the Moon Prince. It's Mamei-san's hand-me-down."

Rather than feeling disappointed, Maomao was happy that it was good quality outerwear.

"The clothes are nice, but yellow is Chue-san's colour, so blue is no good. Makes Chue-san's face look dark actually."

Maomao yawned as she ate breakfast. It was yesterday's dinner leftovers in a bun.

“It looks delicious. Give some please.”

“Chue-san ate a proper meal, didn’t you? Please bear with it. By the way…” Maomao chewed as she left the dorms and groaned. “Aren’t we going by carriage?”

“We’ll be too late with a carriage, so we’ll be on horseback today.” Chue led a fine horse by the reins. No wonder she prepared the outerwear. It’s so I don’t get cold, Maomao thought.

Chapter 3

After urging the horse on, they reached their destination in under a dual hour.

“Is this the place?” Maomao asked.

“This is the place,” Chue replied.

The gate was impressive–impressive from its size–but it was slightly old. The remnants of paint that clung to the gate and pillars suggested that the colours had been a much brighter shade in the past. The large framed board was discoloured and worn down by the elements, so much so that they could barely make out the inscription that must have been handwritten: Red Plum Mansion.

I probably don’t need to remember it.

Maomao followed Chue.

“Chue-san, Chue-san.”

“What is it, Maomao-san?”

Maomao looked around amidst their usual exchange. “Is this really a temple? It doesn’t have a temple-sounding name.”

“It’s more like a farm, right?”

It was just as Chue said. There were horses, cows, and chickens around them. It was all livestock.

And, perhaps to be self-sufficient, there was also a large field that was growing many vegetables.

“Ooooh, oooohhh.”

“Yes, yes, Maomao-san. You mustn’t pick any herbal medicines you find. We’ll get in trouble.”

Chue pulled Maomao by the scruff of her neck and dragged her away. She was able to drag Maomao away with one hand on the reins even though her dominant hand should barely be usable.

Maomao confirmed while looking at the idyllic scene. “There are a lot of vegetables, herbal medicines, and livestock that are good for health.”

“That’s true.”

“You say this is a temple but isn’t this actually something of an abode for rich people and their hobbies?”

“Why do you think so?”

“Everyone here is healthy and has glossy skin. Despite the simple look, don’t they have quite good nutrition? The building looks old at a glance but the repairs have been meticulously done.”

Chue nodded in agreement.

“They occasionally do exist. People, when they are weary of the world, who wish for a simple life in the countryside,” Maomao added.

“I’m not refuting, but well, it’s similar but different. This here is an institution that came about from gathering the rich people you talked about. Well, in a sense, you can say that they are gathering Taoists who are trying to understand the path.”

“Taoists?” Maomao asked to confirm.

Chue made a large circle with her hands to indicate that she was correct. “Yes, how long can people live because of the food they eat? It is a gathering of people who logically consider the wild tale of ascending into an immortal, so this could be right up Maomao-san’s tastes.”

“…I don’t hate it.” Maomao eyed it in doubt as she broke into a smile.

Just like how healthy food is said to prevent and cure illnesses, there is a significant link between eating habits and longevity.

Despite the strong smell of livestock, it wasn’t unhygienic. Animals were not standing in their filth, but instead, the manure was stored in one place. They seemed to be fermenting inside, judging by the visible white steam.

There were also cows–a lot of cows with large teats. She could tell that cow's milk was used as food.

Could they also be catching prawns, loaches, or eels, judging by the traps placed along the pond and river?

Could the food here be really good?

Anticipation swelled in Maomao's chest. There was no guarantee that she would be treated to a meal here, however. As for why…

"Ahh, there they are. See, over there," Chue said.

A man and a woman stood in front of a building that appeared to be a large birdhouse.

One was Basen and the other was a willowy woman.

She's grown up.

Maomao had a feeling that the other woman had grown quite a bit since they last met. Once smaller than Maomao, she must have surpassed her now. Her slender figure was probably unchanged. There was a little tan to her fair skin and cherry-hued cheeks. Her plain outfit, while difficult to be described as gorgeous, had its durability as its strong point. Just the fact that there was no patching proved that it was of decent make.

It was Lishu, the girl who didn't seem like she had once been a high-ranking consort, one of the four authorities within the inner palace.

"Come, Maomao-san. Come this way."

Chue dramatically had a tree branch in each hand. As it was a pain, Maomao decided against a retort about whether there was any point in holding those when they were hiding in the shadow of a tree.

"Please explain the situation," Maomao said.

"Did I talk about something like his imperial majesty asking my brother-in-law about him getting bestowed a consort if he completed a meritorious deed before, Maomao-san?"

"I don't quite remember, and at least, I feel that Chue-san wasn't there." Maomao thought far back.

“Actually, there is no such personage who would object to whoever Lishu-sama marries. A lot of people might complain publicly, but his imperial majesty sees Lishu-sama as his daughter. The head of the U clan doesn’t wish to have his cute granddaughter retired to religion forever, and I doubt he has ill feelings towards an appeal of the sort from the Ma clan. Otherwise, my brother-in-law wouldn’t be visiting Lishu-sama under the pretence of work.” Chue winked.

‘It’s gotten cold. How are you?”

“I am fine. I’ve also grown used to the work.”

Chue was reading Basen and Lishu’s lips.

“Chue-san, there’s nothing you can’t do.”

“Not at all, this is the necessary accomplishment of a wife.”

Maomao felt she had never seen a wife who could lip-read aside from Chue.

“What kind of work do you have today?”

“My older sister told me to bring another duck. We already have one at home, though.”

Come to think of it, Basen does have a duck around him.

No matter how I see it, the duck is an excuse.

His older sister should be Mamei. She would stop at nothing to get her younger brother married.

“Oh, your slender white hands have turned red.”

“What slender white hands– I’m so embarrassed that even my face has turned red. As it is, my heart is racing from the sight of Basen-sama’s broad chest.”

“No, I feel the same. My blood is burning up–”

“Chue-san.”

“Yes.”

“Are you bored?”

Midway, Chue changed the lines and played around.

“I mean, all they talk about is too slow and has no substance. It’s not like you can always talk about the weather.”

It was certainly boring, but for two awkward people, no doubt spicing up a conversation with a fun topic would be more difficult than passing the imperial examination

What a pain.

“Wouldn’t it be faster to put those two together through an order from above?” Chue said.

“Yes,” Maomao agreed.

“Everyone else thinks the same for Maomao-san too.”

“…” Maomao averted her eyes.

“And so, supporting them from the shadows is Chue-san and Maomao-san’s job. We can devise a method they can accept even if it’s indirectly.”

“Specifically by doing what?”

“If my brother-in-law performs a great deed, it’ll be easy-peasy. His self-esteem is too low, although he’s not as bad as the Moon Prince.”

Maomao understood that too. “I believe it’s not going to work unless he believes in himself and has a reason to marry Lishu-sama.”

“He should just pick up the courage and go kiss her. It’s troubling that he’s so indirect.”

While they had such a conversation, the two people started to take care of the ducks.

“Do you know of an incident with a distinguished act where my brother-in-law could raise his self-esteem?” Chue asked.

“I think he actively participated at the western capital, but would that be too weak?” Maomao replied.

“It’s not, but my brother-in-law doesn’t think that he participated.”

This is a total pain, Maomao thought as she looked around.

She could see a cowshed some distance away from the duckhouse.

If there are a lot of cows, does that mean that at least one of them would have a bezoar?

So Maomao thought.

“This is so vexing. Come on, you over there, fall over accidentally on purpose and wake him up. Ahhh, if only Chue-san can become a mischievous wind to flip up Lishu-sama’s skirt.”

“Then is there a meaning to us looking out for them today?” Maomao asked.

“Chue-san’s hobby.”

“I’m heading back.” Maomao got up and went back the way they came from.

“You won’t be able to find a carriage in such a remote place, you know?” Chue grinned.

So is that why we came by horse? Maomao looked at her dubiously.

“For the time being, there’s no way we can keep watching those two slow people, so why don’t we head back for now?”

“…”

“In truth, I would like to treat you to the meal for ascension, but we weren’t granted permission to that extent.”

Maomao pouted as they headed for the stables where they had left the horse.

In the stables, there was a man with an unpleasant look in his eyes who was carefully combing a horse. The stables were large, perhaps holding dozens of horses. All of the animals were solidly built, so she could tell that they were used for farmwork.

“Excuse me. Please return our horse,” Chue said.

The man wordlessly brought the horse they rode over to them. “Here you are.”

“Okay, okay.”

The man diligently started to comb the horse again.

“Young man, you have been working in this job for a long time, right?”

“Around a decade.”

“What do you think of the girl called Lishu-san who came in two years ago?”

“I heard she is not a person someone like me can talk to.”

“Hmhm.”

He seems to be aware that she is a girl from a good family.

“Don’t get in the way of my work,” he said.

“Oh my, excuse me.” Chue stuck out her tongue as she apologised with a quick bow.

Maomao got used to seeing beauties while she was in the inner palace, but Lishu was an existence akin to a crane in a rubbish heap. It wouldn’t be odd to have one or two men try to lay their hands on her.

“It’s a good thing that everyone around her has been reined in.” Chue squinted her eyes into a smile and urged the horse onwards.

Chapter 4

“Ahh, it’s cold.” Maomao got up sniffling. “I’ll need to prepare a quilt.”

She pinched the thin mattress. The bedding that Maomao owned had been lent to another girl during the year she was away and hasn’t been returned. Those who lent it out without permission were to blame, but just the fact that the room she hasn’t used in a year has been left untouched is a good thing, she thought. If she was unlucky, it wouldn’t be odd if everything she owned was gone.

Maomao didn’t hate her current workplace, but if there was one thing to complain about, it was that the start work hours didn’t match up. Unlike the pleasure district, there was no crone to rouse her out of bed even if she were to sleep in. To not arrive late to work, she had to wake up at the same time every day.

I have a late shift today, so I have some time to spare.

She refrained from going back to sleep. It would be difficult to wake up from a second nap, even more so with how cold it was now. Maomao draped a slightly thicker outer garment over her shoulders and moved to the dining hall.

“Good morning.” Changsha, a junior court lady, was eating breakfast. It was a congee with medicinal herbs, seasoned with salt and vinegar. A simple commoners’ meal with no other side dish. Maomao got too used to the breakfasts of the rich.

“Good morning.” Maomao ate the same congee as Changsha. Athough there was a dining hall, people had to cook for themselves, so Maomao and Changsha often cooked their meals together. Today’s congee was what Maomao made last night. “What’s in today’s congee?” she asked the other court lady.

“Dropwort root and carrot. And judging by the smell, there’s also fish mint,” Changsha answered.

“Yup. I made tea.”

The reason Maomao purposely added something that smelled was so the other residents in the dorms didn’t snatch their food. Before, when En’en was around, if she prepared food in advance, there won’t be any left in the morning.

In En’en’s case, she would rarely finish with just cooking food for Yao in advance.

The dorms only had smart court ladies, but because of that, there were also a lot of people who were inexperienced in cooking. The reason for the lack of cooks despite there being a dining hall was in hand with the court ladies’ goal of finding a marriage partner. Having the need to cook for yourself was bothersome after all.

“Also, it’s thick and warm. Is there kudzu?”

“Correct.”

Changsha’s nose and tongue was good. She possessed more than enough talent to become a herbalist. It was likely that on knowledge of medicine alone, she was much better than Yao.

“Here, take this,” Maomao said.

“Thank you very much.”

Maomao gave her an egg. It was the century eggs she received from Chue when they returned yesterday. Since they have a duck connection, could it be supplied from the Red Plum Mansion place? Maomao didn’t pry too deeply.

“Is Changsha-san on the late shift today too?”

“Yes. We can take it slowly.”

“Agreed.”

Honestly speaking, this time is the most leisurely, Maomao thought. That being said, it was Maomao's bad habit to ruminate on all sorts of things in her mind. After adding a century egg to the congee, the flavour was perfected.

Today's work.

It would be a full day of work at the medical office. The odd jobs have piled up so she had to clear them away.

I wonder how Basen is since then.

Probably no progress. Apart from Chue getting in touch with her, Maomao didn't take any action herself.

Next is…

"Changsha-san."

"Yes?"

"Is Yo back yet?"

A few days ago, the court lady went to the old court physician to see patients out in the country.

"From yesterday, she hasn't returned yet. Why did Yo-san join them?" Changsha asked.

"Isn't it because Yo-san is suitable for the job?" Maomao talked about it before Court Physician Ri and the others, but not yet to Changsha. "Also, how are Yao-san and the others?"

"They're good. Yesterday, a military officer proposed to Yao-san, so En'en-san was terrifying the entire time."

"I want them to not do it at work." Maomao tilted the bowl to scoop up the last bits of congee to eat.

Afterwards, when Maomao leisurely headed over to work, a temporary closure notice was hung up at the medical office. Chairs were set up in the backroom and everyone was sitting.

Other court physicians have gathered around inside and were speaking in serious tones. Court Physician Liu was among them, so she understood that it wasn't a simple matter.

Although there wasn't a meeting scheduled, everyone's eyes were on the old court physician.

They're back.

Yo was also there. The court lady's eyes were wandering, wondering if it was fine for her to be there, and then she caught Maomao's eyes. The moment she saw Maomao, she brightened up. The newcomer wasn't yet used to a all-male workplace.

I wonder what's up.

Maomao stepped inside nonchalantly. As she has been around for longer than Yo, she was a lot bolder when it came to things like this. For an instant, Court Physician Liu made a face, but he made no move of driving her out, and the talks began.

"Sorry for being late. We needed a few days to see how we were faring too. In truth, we would have liked ten or so days to confirm, but forgive us." Instead, the old court physician was in thick clothes and his mouth was also covered with a cloth. Yo was dressed in the same attire.

"We know that already. Give us your conclusion." Court Physician Liu looked on edge.

"It is smallpox. The number of infected are still low, but I wonder if we can deal with it appropriately," the old court physician said.

Smallpox!

Her bad feeling seemed to have been right on the mark.

"Uncontrolled, it will spread to the people in the capital. It is imperative we deal with it properly."

"Will it be fine?" An uneasy young court physician looked at the old court physician.

"Our actions are so we can say it will be fine. Or do you not understand such a concept either?" As always, Court Physician Liu ended his speech harshly. The young court physician trembled.

"Are the symptomatic people in one place?" Court Physician Liu asked.

The old court physician answered, "Yes, the village is currently in a temporary lockdown. Two court physicians have been posted there, but that might not be enough people soon. Also, I would like to have military officers to work as guards. The incubation period of smallpox is long, so we'll need to seal them off for half a month."

"New workers, huh?"

“Liu-san can’t go. We can’t have the worst case scenario of the emperor’s attending physician infected.” The old court physician shook his head. “I would like to assemble court physicians and military officers who have contracted smallpox before. Preferably those with perseverance.”

“Do you know the source of the infection?”

Yo jolted.

“As if we would know the answer to that. And I would rather we now put our focus on appropriate ways to deal with it than who the source is.”

“Right. My bad.”

“So, please squeeze out as much wages as you can for the dispatched court physician and military officers. That’s all you can do for us, Liu-san.”

“…Got it. You always get the short end of the stick.”

“What now? I have it a lot better than Luomen. That guy truly has it bad. I can only think that he is cursed wherever he treads.”

Not expecting to hear her dad’s name, Maomao made a face like a cat that caught a whiff of something bad.

“And so, there’s nothing much you worriers can do, so please work as normal. Also, the people coming with me, give your best effort. Court Physician Liu will be doubling your wages, so you can look forward to that.”

He’s good.

Yo had an expression of unease, but it was reassuring if the old court physician was nearby.

“However, setting the military officers aside, are there court physicians who have contracted smallpox before?” Court Physician Liu crossed his arms. “Could there be anyone?”

“We probably have people who are concealing it, but I doubt they would come along on their own accord. Also, it would be fine to have a few doctors still. Anyone know one?”

Court Physician Liu and the old court physician made troubled looks.

Maomao rubbed her chin, then raised her hand. “Would a civilian doctor be alright?”

Yo looked at Maomao. She seemed to guess who this was about.

“Civilian? He’s not some strange witch doctor, right?” the old court physician asked.

“He’s strange, but he’s not a witch doctor.”

“I don’t care if he’s from the Ra clan or some random.”

Is it really okay? Court Physician Liu eyed Maomao with suspicion to the bitter end.

Chapter 5

A civilian doctor knowledgeable in smallpox. Kokuyou was the only one Maomao knew of.

A young man with half his face scarred by smallpox, and an easy-going personality that thought nothing of his unfortunate past.

That was the person Maomao sent the letter to.

‘Ahhh, I’m coming! Yayyyy!’

She got a really simple reply. Just as imagined.

This was the man who had a criminal record of attempting to take the court lady exam while in drag. If you invited him over from the other side, no way was he going to turn down the opportunity.

Although, his reply came attached with a letter from Sazen.

“Sazen-san, is the person currently working at the apothecary, right?” Yo looked at the letter with a tilt of her head. It was much thicker than the letter from Kokuyou.

The two of them checked the contents. To summarise the letter that was brimming with sadness, inviting sympathy, it was: “Don’t take Kokuyou away!” There were tear-stains on the paper. You could believe it was a petition letter offered up by a wife to stop her husband from going to war.

“When did he become Doctor’s wife?” Yo asked.

“Beats me.”

It was unknown whether Yo was serious or joking.

Anyway, Kokuyou himself was on board with it, so he will be coming at once.

The interviewers were her dad, Luomen, Court Physician Liu, the old court physician, and one other high-ranking court physician.

The old court physician decided to take the opportunity to see Kokuyou before he went back.

As his referees, Maomao and Yo were on clerk duty in the corner of the room.

Kokuyou was smiling foolishly like always. His attire was slightly better than usual because he had removed the cloth that covered half his face when he sat before the interviewers.

He looked more striking with the scars on his handsome face.

“I’m Kokuyou. Pleased to meet you.”

“I heard you’re knowledgeable in treating smallpox. How about it?”

Needless to say, it was Court Physician Liu who proceeded with the talks.

“Exactly so. My master inoculated me with pus from a smallpox patient. I developed smallpox, it got worse, and I turned out like this. I was really lucky that I didn’t die.”

As always, this man spoke of unfortunate things bluntly.

“Do you mean the symptoms worsened after infection control measures were implemented?” Luomen asked to confirm.

“No, I had a younger twin brother. My master wanted to see what happens when you inoculate twins raised in the same environment with different pus. We were infected on purpose.”

It was human experimentation.

Although Maomao did such things as well, it wasn’t to the extent of Kokuyou’s master.

“And the result?”

“My symptoms worsened and my younger brother just got a mild fever.”

“Where was the pus that inoculated your younger brother sourced from?”
“Where is your master now?”

The court physicians' interests shifted from the interview to the experiment Kokuyou had undergone.

"My master died. I'm in a fix since he didn't leave behind his research materials."

"Then, does your younger brother know?"

"My younger brother also died. When he saw my pockmarked face, he was so shocked he stabbed our master. That was the reason no materials were left behind. Afterwards, my younger brother hung himself out of remorse."

Brutal…

She heard that his master died, but it was much more brutal than she imagined.

Yo's face had paled. The court physicians were also put off. Only Luomen looked at Kokuyou sadly.

"It was over ten years ago. I've been studying my master's research the entire time, but it's quite the undertaking. Anyway, I've brought the materials of my research relating to epidemics."

Court Physician Liu wordlessly accepted the materials and looked through them. He also showed it to Luomen and shared it with the other court physicians. Despite his flippant way of speaking, his materials seemed legit–in particular, the old court physician nodded many times.

I'm curious…

Maomao thought about having Kokuyou show them to her later as well.

She suddenly looked at Yo, who was hanging her head with a pale face. Maomao shook the other court lady's shoulders. "Our clerk duty isn't done yet."

"R-right." Yo flusteredly moved her brush.

"What is this 'lifetime immunisation'?"

"It is a phrase my master used occasionally. It means not contracting the disease for the rest of your life after contracting it once. I suppose I used a phrase translated from the language of my master's country."

"Can you assert this to be true?"

“I cannot, but I have inoculated myself with pus every three years and haven’t developed the disease. Also, I have not heard of anyone contracting the disease again after contracting it once at the smallpox village despite several outbreaks. I believe if you increase the parameters, exceptions would also increase, but to my knowledge, it is generally the case that after getting it once, you won’t get it again.”

It seems the views of the four court physicians aligned.

“Would it be alright if we copy your materials?”

Kokuyou didn’t reply, all smiles.

“We’ll pay you fifty silvers.”

“Sure,” Kokuyou said.

Surprisingly, this man had good money sense.

“Also, in terms of employment, it will not be at the imperial court. You will be going to the countryside. Would it be alright even if the stay becomes long-term?”

Kokuyou was all smiles again.

“We’ll pay you two silvers per day.”

Kokuyou did not move.

“…How about two silvers and a half, no, three silvers?”

Still no movement.

“Fine. Five silvers!”

It was extremely generous.

Kokuyou finally nodded.

“I-is that okay? I think five silver is on par with the treatment of a high-ranking court physician, though.” Yo, becoming concerned, shook Maomao.

“With you being an irreplaceable talent, we will give you this much. If this was a commodity, it could rise ten times, a hundred times in value.”

But with Court Physician Liu as the other party, they won’t be bullish, Maomao thought.

“Then, five silvers.”

“No.”

Is he trying to raise it even higher? she thought.

Kokuyou lifted three fingers. “No need for five silvers. I’ll be happy with three. Also, can you prepare a carriage to get me there and provide me with sleeping quarters and food separately?”

“Yeah, we’ll prepare that for you as much as you like.” The court physicians stroke down their chests in relief.

After the interview was over, Maomao and Yo were entrusted to guide Kokuyou. It was to hand him his court physician robes and the bare minimum of tools before he went to his work posting.

“Fufufu, it’s good fortune that I was able to get a government job. We’ll be together, Yo,” Kokuyou said.

“I’m also happy that I will be with Doctor, but it’s not a fun workplace.” Yo’s face paled.

“How is it at the posting now?” Maomao wanted to ask in detail.

“We get around one to two patients per day as of now. But the village itself has been locked down, so the mood is bad. The frustration grows by the day,” Yo replied.

“Yo hasn’t personally examined a patient yet, right?”

“No, I’ve been told that I will be going as Court Physician Lao’s assistant.”

That’s right. The old court physician was Court Physician Lao.

Even Maomao remembered the name of the boss of her posting. More than anything, she remembered names that were easy to remember like Wanwan-senpai, but she just ended up calling Court Physician Lao the old court physician, taking the name Lao (老) for the meaning of old.

“Once the number of workers is secured, I might be entering the village as well,” Yo said.

“…If you don’t want to, you don’t have to do it,” Maomao said honestly.

“No, I believe it is possible because it is me. The things that I can do that Maomao-san can’t are limited, after all.”

“Then it’s fine.”

The court lady wasn’t scared of just the epidemic. The frustration of the oppressed residents would fall onto the court physicians on site.

“My dad told me he will be coming with me. He’s eager since the pay is good too.”

Yo’s family had taken care of the surviving children of their village and moved to the capital. It might represent a golden opportunity to earn food expenses.

“Come to think of it, Kokuyou, are you good with three silvers as your pay?” Maomao asked.

“Yup. It’s much higher than the sum I get for showing my face at the apothecary in the pleasure district,” Kokuyou said.

Sorry for the low pay.

Maomao gave him a stiff smile.

Sazen will probably manage.

Sazen just had low self-esteem. He wasn’t bad as a herbalist. However, he had a part of him that didn’t forgive failure. Since the effectiveness of medicine was determined by individual differences, there was no need to brood over it. Just that he will have to manage when it came to recognising the time to quit when the medicine wasn’t a good fit.

“But five silvers, huuuh? Court Physician Liu, was it? He’s a good doctor,” Kokuyou said.

“He’s an outstanding doctor. Just strict,” Maomao said.

Court Physician Liu was on par with Luomen, a noted doctor of Li.

“He may be strict, but I’m happy that he seriously appreciated me. Among them some worked me hard for an entire day for a few coppers. He even gave me fifty silvers to copy my materials. I’ll have to do a good job. I need to treat the people who appreciate me right.”

“Then, what about people who didn’t appreciate you?”

“I’ll treat them in the way they deserve.”

It was oddly deep, so Maomao decided to not ask any more deeply. “I don’t think you were worked that hard, though.”

“I’ll demand a wage increase to five silvers when the time comes.”

“That’s only if you succeed in getting that increase.”

“That might be difficult.”

In other words, he will be getting busy.

“The materials just now, can you show it to me too?”

The materials were also approved by high-ranking court physicians. It possessed that much value.

“Sure, but can you pay me fifty silvers?”

“Ugh.” That was two to three months of Maomao’s salary. “Can’t you give me a friend’s discount?”

“Let me think about it.”

His haggling is actually on par with Rahan, Maomao thought.

Chapter 6

Friend’s discount. Kokuyou priced his research materials at ten silvers for her.

While Maomao would have preferred a bigger discount, the high-ranking court physicians had paid fifty silvers for it. As it was not good to be too greedy, she held back. She also wanted to stay on good terms with Kokuyou for a little while longer.

She had the option of getting the high-ranking court physicians show her what they copied as well, but she wanted to review the original text Kokuyou wrote as soon as possible.

Kokuyou may be particular about money, but he wasn’t a miser. It was just that he used money as an easy way to gauge how people appraised him.

The man had a flippant way of speaking, but he was able to think about medicine in a deeply rational way as well. Even though he made concessions for others, he would often suddenly disappear if they continued to make unfair bargains.

It didn't mean that people like Kokuyou who were benevolent to those who treated them badly were kind. He could only do so because he had little attachment to people. She had to bear that fact in mind.

As Maomao read through the copy of Kokuyou's materials, she nodded in approval. The materials were with her now that the high-ranking court physicians had finished copying it. She was reading it in the dining hall, not in her room since it was much brighter and warmer here. Ten silvers was a great expense, so she wanted to save on oil and charcoal for lighting and heating.

"Maomao, what is this?"

Changsha came over to look.

I want to ask for a reading fee.

But the junior court lady's salary was much lower than Maomao's. Since Changsha cooked more often, Maomao decided to let her see it.

"It's research material on epidemics. This might prove useful from now on, so shall we read through it together?" Maomao said.

"Are you sure?" Changsha's face brightened. What an honest child.

She's different from the girls who come to the pleasure district.

All the girls who come to the pleasure district have been sold. They came from poor peasant families or were the daughters of merchants who have suddenly fallen into hard times. So it is natural for them to be bitter, Maomao thought. Although girls with nice personalities do exist as well, they don't last long without good common sense.

It didn't mean that the girls who become courtesans have nasty personalities—it was a comparison to show how blessed Changsha was.

Kokuyou's handwriting was surprisingly good. There were scribbles in a foreign script in various places as well.

Seeing these makes me want to see the original text.

She heard that Kokuyou's master was a foreigner, so she figured that Kokuyou's medicinal vocabulary was mixed with foreign language.

"Smallpox, huh? Will Yo be alright?" Changsha said.

"It is what it is. Concern won't do much, so let us do what we can."

"You're right. Come to think of it," Changsha looked a little frustrated. She brought up a different topic for a change of mood. "I want to say that Yao-san and En'en-san are the same, but…"

"But?" Maomao asked.

"I found it unusual that she had an argument with En'en-san the other day."

"An argument?" Maomao had an idea what the argument was about. "Could it be about a man?"

"Yes. Yao-san is a really awkward person, right?"

"Ah, you can tell?" Maomao found herself agreeing with Changsha.

"Yes. Yao-san likes a person called Rahan, right?"

She was so accurate Maomao felt bad for Yao.

"Likes, might not be right term for it, but well. Rather, you even know his name, huh?" Maomao had no idea if Yao was aware of her feeling yet.

"Yes. En'en-san is always letting it slip. While she has a face of a demon. Also, I have pretty much grasped it from the hints the two of them were dropping. How audacious, right? To come up with a reason to settle into the house of the person you like. The topic of the argument was about whether it's time they should move out."

Maomao nodded in understanding.

"Also, En'en-san only has eyes for Yao-san. The person that comes over to see En'en-san from time to time gets mercilessly cut off too."

"Uh huh." Rahan's older brother's face came to mind. His real name was Kan-something-san.

"Yao-san is awkward as well. Is the target of her feelings someone who would sprout love from having her getting close to him by staying at his residence? I think normally, he would find them noisy and annoying. Well, Yao-san is from a good family. She's wealthy. She's attractive too. So, it would only be enviable for those from the unrelated male camp. The person concerned would find it utterly unbearable."

No, honest child, repeal that.

The honest child had observed the bad points of her seniors and spoke frankly about it. Given how she passed the exam, she was a smart child.

“Will you say this before the people in question?” Maomao asked.

“There’s no way I can.” Changsha shook her head. “But for the both of them, I don’t think this will end unless they give up and express their feelings or they come to their senses. It would be good to have a third party come in, but it would be difficult since Yao-san is stubborn.”

Maomao was also of the same mind.

“En’en-san has no way of telling Yao-san directly, and even if she did, she would be shrugged off. She can only indirectly argue with her with talks of moving out.”

It probably wasn’t a real argument. En’en had to be fully feeling regretful towards Yao.

“There is one other way to resolve it, but it has the lowest chance of happening.”

“Ahh, would it be for the other party to like her too?” Maomao asked.

“Yes.”

Not in a million years, Maomao shook her head.

“But it is possible that Rahan person could give in, right?”

“She comes with a very scary sister-in-law called En’en, though?” Maomao said.

“That is a terrifying thought.”

There were barely any people left in the dining hall whilst they were chatting. The dorm manager was imploring them to leave with her eyes.

“Well then, shall we get ready for bed?” Maomao asked.

“Yes.”

Maomao got up from her seat and picked up the research materials.

And that was when she became aware of the characteristic sound of footsteps approaching.

“Good daaaay.”

To end her speech in such a characteristic way, it could only be Chue.

“It’s not the time for good day anymore. The sun has already set.” Maomao sensed trouble in the air. “Changsha, please head to bed. You have an early start tomorrow too, right?”

“Excuse me.”

Although Changsha was curious, Maomao headed to work. “Now then, what could today’s matter be about? Are we going to watch Basen-sama again? Wouldn’t that be considered voyeurism at this time of the day? More importantly, I doubt Basen-sama has the finesse to ask girls out in the middle of the night.”

“Yes. Chue-san won’t have to work so hard if my brother-in-law can sneak into a woman’s bedroom or arrange for a tryst. Shall we take him to the Verdigris Mansion for practice again?”

“Absolutely not. The madam will beat me up if he struggled and destroyed the building.”

Also, she had no idea how high the madam would overcharge in the reparations bill.

“How unfortunate. Today’s matter is not about my brother-in-law. A slight problem came up, so won’t you come to the Moon Prince’s place today?”

“May I ask what this problem is?”

Jinshi had been summoning Maomao less often for matters like this. He no longer had to excuse to have her come in for wound treatment, and he must be busy with work as well. But would the biggest reason be that the person himself was drawing a line?

And so, Maomao presumed that he had summoned her for a proper reason this time.

There were no other court ladies in the dining hall. The dorm manager, perhaps having read the room, had stepped outside.

Chue leaned towards Maomao’s ear. “A cursed jar has been found under the eaves of a certain government official’s house.”

“Oh my, what a nostalgic matter.” It was a matter Maomao heard all the time back when she was at the inner palace.

“And a troubling point is how that the government official’s daughter is getting weaker.”

To the point that the matter would be brought to Jinshi. She guessed that they had to be quite a high-ranking family even though they were calling them a government official.

“You mean to break the curse.”

“Yes, just as Maomao-san says.”

“I do not believe in curses?”

“Fufufu, that is your feelings. Even if curses don’t exist for Maomao-san, for other people, they can only call things they can’t explain a curse.”

Reasonable, Maomao thought as well. “Is there a possibility of there being poison?”

Chue was all smiles. “Won’t you come with meee?”

“Can’t be helped,” Maomao said, although she didn’t look displeased at all.

It’s a bad side of me, she thought, but it was an unchangeable part of Maomao’s nature.

Chapter 7

With Chue leading the way, Maomao was brought to Jinshi’s palace, or so she had thought.

The carriage arrived at a warehouse near Jinshi’s palace. At the site, lit by bonfires, were Jinshi, Basen, and Mamei. There were other guards she recognised, but as always, she didn’t remember their names, so let’s leave them out.

Sorrry for being late at night.

It was warmer than expected inside the warehouse. There was light as well as a few braziers. Although, she was uneasy about ventilation–Maomao made sure the windows and entranceway had been left ajar.

“Pardon me for summoning you.”

Jinshi was sitting on a simple chair, looking at a suspicious jar. It wasn’t the palace, but she could see the effort put into making this place as comfortable as possible. A space alike a small room had been built in the interior of the warehouse.

“Sorry for the abruptness, but can you take a look?” He glanced at Maomao, but shook his head lightly as if to tell himself that it wasn’t the time for this.

“What an icky jar,” Maomao said.

“Don’t try to touch it while saying it’s filthy.” Jinshi slapped Maomao’s hand away.

“If I do not touch it, we will not know what is inside.”

“We can leave that for someone else to do, right?”

The jar was big enough to rest on two open palms. It was firmly sealed, with several talisman-like sheets pasted onto the lid. Curses had been written on the talisman, making it the very picture of a curse jar.

Suiren probably didn’t allow cursed items to be brought into the palace, which was why they were doing this in this warehouse.

“What does it contain?” she asked.

“We have yet to investigate. It seems to be filled with a liquid. It shouldn’t be a poison derived from insects,” he said.

“Well, it had been left long enough to liquify, that would be nasty.” Maomao had once neglected a snake she had been raising. At the time, it had dried up into a husk. “What if it contains blood?”

“Maomao-san, you bring up unpleasant things to imagine, huuuh?” Chue was dramatically frightened.

“So this was found at a high official’s house, right?” Maomao said.

“Yeah,” Jinshi replied.

“And it was brought to Jinshi-sama’s place.”

“Yeah.”

Maomao let out a huge breath.

It would be a different matter if it were the Eunuch Jinshi, but a personage had brought the curse jar to the imperial brother. No one would do such a bold thing. Normally, it would be perceived as disrespectful.

I have one person in mind who'd do such a thing.

But it wouldn't be. The weirdo tactician was the first person that came to Maomao's mind. That person would cook up something much different to harass Jinshi. Also, he would do it personally if it was an act that would harm himself. He wouldn't need Jinshi's help.

In that case…

She pondered through the process of elimination.

"…Could it be related to the empress dowager's family?" Although she had hesitated, she brought it up now.

Jinshi let out a big sigh instead of replying.

Also, with how clearly Basen was shaken, it had to be the case.

"Word is that it was buried under the eaves. It was discovered by a cat they raised," Jinshi said.

"What a clever cat." Maomao took out a towel from her breast pocket and wrapped her right hand in it.

"What are you planning to do?"

"You told me to investigate, but at this rate, we will not be able to do anything. How about I give it a feel for the time being?"

"But–"

Jinshi looked like he had a lot to say. Chue looked amused and Mamei held a towel out to Basen.

"I'll do it," Basen said as he wrapped his hand in the towel. "My body is not so weak that it would lose to the likes of a curse."

"No, that's true, but–"

Both Jinshi and Maomao looked uneasy. What should they do at a time like this? It seemed like some flag had been hoisted into the air.

"Rather than Basen-sama, you should leave it to me," Maomao said.

"No, Maomao-san. My younger brother should be able to do this at least–"

A crack resounded without waiting for Mamei's words.

A broken jar sat on Basen's hand. He looked embarrassed. "With my hand wrapped up, I couldn't control my strength…"

"You stupid younger brother!" Mamei's humble expression transformed into that of a demon's and she smashed a fist into Basen's chin. The other guards wondered if they should stop her.

"Basen-sama is no good with fragile items, I see," Maomao said.

"Yeah. I knew that, I knew, but.." Jinshi was clutching his head too.

Maomao crouched down and checked the smashed jar and the fluid that had spilled out.

"Can Maomao-san see?" Chue brought the light closer for Maomao.

"Yes, that helps."

The contents were a dark fluid. It had a characteristic smell. It didn't seem to be blood.

"…"

"Hey!" Jinshi stopped Maomao who had dipped her finger into the fluid. "What if you get cursed?"

"I will not get cursed. It is more annoying than a curse, though." Maomao took a whiff of the fluid on her fingers. It smelt like tea. "As expected, poison. More correctly it would be poison in the middle of maturation."

It was a strongly brewed tea.

Chapter 8

Maomao said that there is a poison made from tea.

"A poison, you say?" Jinshi made a face that contained a hint of annoyance. It was a poison common in the imperial court.

"When you fill a bamboo tube with strong tea and bury it in soil for a month, it becomes a poison. It works better with dried and high-grade teas. Although they didn't use a bamboo tube this time, it should be made the same way. However, I would like to properly check if using a

bamboo tube or a jar changes the poison. The book didn't have a recipe that uses a jar," Maomao said.

"You don't have to check it. Rather, such a book exist?" Jinshi said.

"If you leave tea for a month, wouldn't it just go off and give you an upset stomach?" Basen said. He was forced to sit on his knees to reflect.

"It became a legit poison."

"Why are you speaking in past tense?" Jinshi sidled up to Maomao.

"Hahaha." Maomao tried to evade it with laughter, but it didn't stop Jinshi's glaring. Note that when she made it in the past, the madam got mad at her for using the Verdigris Mansion's high-grade tea leaves and she got frantically detoxed by Luomen when she gradually weakened from testing it out.

"For the time being, it is important we resolve this incident." Maomao checked the broken jar and the contents, evading the topic. "It doesn't seem to have completely matured yet. They could have stuck on the curse talismans because they took poison-making to be like sorcery, or they wanted to make it look like they were casting a curse instead of making poison."

"Mmmn," Jinshi groaned.

"Is there anything odd about it?"

"How is this poison used? What effect does it have?" Jinshi asked to make sure.

"You treat the target with a few drops a day. In doing so, the target's stomach will gradually weaken, and they will die in a few months' time." Maomao also suffered from nausea and stomach pains. If it were a weakened person, they could waste away and die within two months.

Jinshi looked at Mamei for confirmation.

"The estate where the curse, no, poison jar was found has a sickly girl. She has a weak stomach and a small appetite," Mamei said.

"Her symptoms match," Jinshi said.

"Mmmn," Maomao groaned. "There is a contradiction if it was used as a poison."

"Where?"

“If the poison was already used, wouldn’t it mean that she has been taking it for long enough that it wouldn’t be odd for her to be already dead? Assuming that the poison was made before what was at hand ran out, how much has she been forced to consume until now?”

Maomao picked up a shard of the broken jar. “Two drops a day in a jar this big, how many days’ worth would that make?”

The jar was big enough to rest on two open palms. Considering how a few drops were used in a day, you could say it contained quite a substantial amount.

“It could easily be half a year’s worth.”

“Then, I do not believe the girl’s weak constitution is from the poison. Based on my own experience with that poison, I reckon it is potent enough to kill someone in poor health within two months…”

Jinshi was glowering at her as if to say, “So you really did try it out, huh?”

“Ahem, anyway. Do I have the opportunity to investigate whether she is still consuming this poison or not?”

“I would very much like to give you that opportunity, but—”

“Is there an issue?”

“You realised it just now, right? The problem lies with whose residence it is.”

Maomao nodded in understanding.

She had said it was the empress dowager’s family. Maomao had no idea of the kind of family they were, but at the very least, they had to be a prominent family since they had presented the young empress dowager to the late emperor. She had no idea about the head of the family, but judging by Jinshi’s reaction, it was better to not get involved with them.

“Didn’t you send me to Crystal Palace many times back when we were at the inner palace?” Maomao asked.

“…At Crystal Palace, although the attendants were a different matter, Consort Lihua’s character is excellent, right?” In other words, Jinshi answered that the head of the empress dowager’s family wasn’t excellent.

“Come to think of it, there is a consort that entered the inner palace from the empress dowager’s family, right?”

“Yeah. That is also an issue.”

“Could it be that they came to you for advice on the curse at the start because they believed that a clan was cursed through a consort?”

Who entered the inner palace again?

She had a feeling it was the empress dowager’s grandchild, no, her sibling’s grandchild.

“The family head’s grandniece–she would be the grandniece of the empress dowager as well–entered the inner palace. It is rumoured that she is currently pregnant,” Mamei supplied.

It was a family that wanted to reinstate Jinshi as the crown prince at any cost. No doubt they were unsettled by this matter now.

“It’s a bothersome matter, be it a curse or poison.”

“Why did they bring you a bothersome matter?” Maomao found herself saying.

Basen was about to yell out, but Mamei slapped his head and he fell silent.

“If it were you, Jinshi-sama, inner palace days aside, shouldn’t it be fine to deal with a heavy hand now?”

“It’s also a request from the empress dowager.”

“From the empress dowager?”

For the empress dowager, regardless of the kind of family they were, they were her family for sure.

“She came to me to discuss whether I could break the curse of that sickly girl. The jar was found near that girl’s room. The girl is the youngest daughter of the current family head. Under normal circumstances, she would have been the one to enter the inner palace instead of the grandniece. Due to her illness, she was deemed unsuitable to be a consort, and not only that, difficult to be married to any other family, so the people around her treated her as if she didn’t exist.”

“Since she’s at a suitable age, that would mean that they are quite far apart in age, right?”

“Yeah. She’s the child of a concubine. The legal wife discovered the jar and tried to drive out the concubine and her daughter. The family head didn’t try to defend them either.”

However, the empress dowager was aware of her niece's existence, and of her obscure position as well.

"She asked me to save that girl," Jinshi said.

"Then, be it a curse or a poison, it's a bothersome matter, huh?"

Does the empress dowager want proof of the girl's innocence, or does she want to protect the girl after she has been driven out from the family?

Jinshi cannot confine a young girl. Then, it would be best for him to provide proof of the girl's innocence, but curse aside, it would be difficult if it turned out to be poison.

A typical way to curse someone is to place a charm near them. If it was a curse, they could use the curse to explain the girl's weak constitution as well.

However, if it was poison instead of a curse, then the story would change.

It would completely change into her being the aggressor who had attempted to create poison from ingredients in her disposal to hurt the family that neglected her.

"What does Jinshi-sama want to do?"

"You ask me. The empress dowager is a benevolent person. She would want to rescue that girl at any cost, not caring about the truth of the jar."

Asking for the impossible.

Maomao crossed her arms and groaned. "We will not know until we see how it actually is."

"I suppose." Jinshi wasn't keen either.

Both Mamei and Basen looked unhappy. Only Chue was having fun like always.

Chapter 9

They decided to set out immediately as they were in a hurry. Although it was already dark out, the residence was located in the capital.

Jinshi began his explanation while in the carriage. He also included things Maomao had already heard as a recap for her, as forgetful as she is.

Mamei and Chue were on a different carriage, and Basen followed them on horseback. Needless to say, this was arranged by Chue.

Unfortunately, Maomao and Jinshi had completely switched to work-mode, so the development that Chue expected won't come to pass.

"The empress dowager has a complicated relationship with her family," Jinshi said.

The empress dowager was the daughter of the concubine of the former family head. The current head was her half-brother. He was called Hao, but Maomao reckoned she would forget his name in no time while she was listening to Jinshi talk.

They were a merchant family with beginnings dealing extensively with dyes. Around a century ago they supplied to the imperial court and it was through this connection that the men of the clan had become government officials. It seems that ochre, the forbidden colour, was also produced by the empress dowager's family.

They were upstarts in a sense, but in time, that became history. During the era of the late emperor, they were properly treated as a mid-level family.

They also sold garments, and it was with this link they got involved with work related to the inner palace. It must be this information network they tapped into that had them later sending in the young Anshi who gave birth to the reigning emperor.

In current times, they should be a family that had found a solid position, however…

"The empress regnant was vigilant of the previous family head. They were never bestowed a clan name despite their association as the imperial family's maternal relative."

"I see," Maomao said.

In short, they were not a named clan.

"The current family head Hao isn't on good terms with the empress dowager. If anything, they're on bad terms. It seems she does not exchange letters with Hao directly, but frequently with the lady."

"I see."

Under normal circumstance, they would be family that could act more importantly, but there was a reason why they couldn't exercise as much influence as expected.

But they still have enough power to stir up the imperial court.

“If they are on bad terms, wouldn’t the empress dowager also have the choice to not take an interest in this matter?” Maomao asked.

“Don’t say that. If she continued to feign ignorance, the victims would be the concubine’s child and her mother. Isn’t it really similar to her own situation?” Jinshi said.

If she remembered correctly, the empress dowager was also the child of a concubine.

“Even if she told you to save her, there are limits. If it were a false charge, then that would be a different story, but in the case where she clearly has an intent to kill, then there is nothing I can do for her,” Maomao said.

Honestly, the girl was the most suspicious as the suspect.

“In that case, it can’t be helped. We only want to know the truth. You can just go confirm that.”

“It would be nice if we can figure that out simply. By the way, what kind of role should I take up?”

“Right, yeah. I just told them you are knowledgeable in insect poisons, but well, I think it would be pointless to hide it.”

“…”

“Also, you may hate this, but honestly speaking, it’s handy to throw the tactician’s name around.”

“I’m aware.” She was very much aware.

What a pain, Maomao thought as she looked outside.

The residence was located at a distance that didn’t need a carriage. Annoyingly, it wasn’t far from the weirdo tactician’s residence.

The capital may be large, but it was limited by living spaces. It was inevitable that the residences of high officials would be in the same area. It was also influenced by the land, so it was easier for estates constructed later to be smaller than others.

Hao’s residence that they were brought to was by no means small. However, it was much too ordinary for a one with the status of the empress dowager’s family.

The gate had a family crest that was a combination of safflower and gardenia.

Both flowers were used as herbal medicines, but they were better known as dyes. Ochre was a yellow tinged with red, so it was created from a mixture of red from the safflower and yellow from the gardenia.

Though imperfect, it was the imperial brother's visit, so there was a group lined up to greet him at the gate.

They did say that's he's of patrilineal descent.

There were certainly no young maidens around. If there were, they were clearly dressed as servants. Let's leave out how the women were looking at Jinshi.

There was a skinny woman in her fifties. Despite her pale complexion, only her nose was painted with scarlet rouge. This woman was the best dressed, so she had to be the lady.

There was also a beauty in her mid-thirties. She was standing at the back humbly, but her dress was the next finest after the lady's. It was remarkably refined for a servant.

"Pardon us that it is late at night."

The person who spoke to Jinshi was a man in his forties or fifties. Based on his attire and where he was standing, he had to be the most important person. He must be Hao, the current family head. Although, she could sense that he was lacking in that dignified air. Was it because of his youthful features? Had he a beard, he might look a few years older, but he didn't grow one, perhaps due to thin body hair.

This is where I can sense his blood relation with the empress dowager.

The empress dowager was also a baby face.

"No, my apologies instead. By all rights, we should have settled this matter privately, and yet we have caused trouble to people. Gosh, Anshi has always been a worrier since way back."

Hao spoke like he got along with the empress dowager. The person must want to be seen in a favourable light.

"Let's head inside for now. It's cold, so I have prepared a warm meal."

"We have already eaten dinner. Rather than that, let's resolve this issue quickly," Jinshi said.

Hao's face twisted for an instant.

Maomao recognised this person to be easy to understand, for better or worse. The previous generation's family head who had sent the empress dowager into the inner palace was most

likely to have had a sharp mind. However, she saw nothing of that razor sharpness in the son. Otherwise, he wouldn't assume such a carefree attitude towards the imperial brother's personal visit to his residence.

His parents raised him wrong.

She heard of the saying where one generation of wealth will be gone by the third generation, but could she take this guy as an example of that?

The Gyoku clan of the west she saw recently appeared similar, but they still had a lot of outstanding sons and daughters.

Hao glanced at Maomao and shot her a look of displeasure, but he didn't make any further reaction. As Jinshi told her, for better or worse, she could use the weirdo tactician talisman as people repellent.

"Then, I would guide you inside, but there is a sick person in the building, so how about the Moon Prince wait here?"

"What did you say when the cursed jar was brought over?" Jinshi said.

"That was Anshi's doing."

Alrighty.

Maomao thought the man called Hao also had a strength. Despite his young features, he was quite thick-skinned. She could tell by looking at him that he would later cover up the word curse and only spread around the news that the imperial brother had visited his household.

She needn't purposely dispatch Jinshi then, Maomao thought.

"Guide them courteously."

Perhaps Hao didn't want to get close to the place that was said to be cursed, he brought a different guide. The guide was a young man in his mid-twenties, much younger than Hao. Considering his baby-faced genes, he might be older than he looked.

"My name is Lai. I will guide you on behalf of my father." The son behaved like he was aware of his position to some extent. It didn't look like he had any intention of showing himself off.

I'm gonna forget his name…

"Please make an effort to remember names when you're here at leaaast," Chue whispered into her ear. She saw through Maomao.

With her usual habit, Maomao ended up studying the inside of the residence. It was hard to see under the moonlight, but she suddenly caught a whiff of a pungent stench.

It smells of a field.

Maomao sniffed the air and looked towards where the smell was coming from. There was an impressive cow shed.

“What could that beee?” Chue asked for Maomao.

“It is a cowshed. The previous emperor bestowed us cows that were used for transport in the inner palace. We are at the third generation,” Lai said.

The current emperor didn’t use oxcarts as they were too slow. Maomao won’t say that he had been discreetly pushed onto one.

Afterwards, Lai barely spoke. Normally, people would introduce their prided garden or talk about their family’s history. It might be because it was so dark they couldn’t see so there was nothing to talk about, but even so, it was quiet. Chue was restless, wanting to chat, but Mamei elbowed her.

The father was a pushy person, but the son only spoke when spoken to. Although his looks resembled his father, was his personality more like the lady?

Maomao appreciated it, but she got worried that everyone would eat him up if he were to become Hao’s successor. Or could he have other siblings?

It’s hard to be in the middle.

While thinking of arbitrary things like how a family is ruined by the third generation, they arrived at their destination.

“This is the place.”

Lai guided them to under the eaves. He directed his light over to make it easier to see. To the north, there was a muddy section where the colour of the soil was different as though a hole about one shaku(30cm) wide had been dug up. There was also a rectangular mark around it, so it looked like there was something placed on top of it.

“The jar was here.”

Maomao looked at Jinshi. Jinshi waved his palm, gesturing for the man to speak freely. “Was it buried in the ground?” he asked.

“Yes, the jar was buried. The shelf over there had been on top of it.”

The shelf had been moved a short distance away. It was for outdoor use; gardening tools were stored in it.

They should borrow digging tools from there.

It was muddy under the eaves of the detached building. People didn’t seem to come here normally. And if there were, would it only be the gardener to store their tools?

“How was it found?” Jinshi asked.

“By chance. The cat was covered to mud, so I went to see what it did and I found a hole dug out here,” Lai said.

“It was a cat?”

“Yes. The cat is left in the care of my family since my cousin’s daughter entered the inner palace.”

If people were aware of even the gardener’s movements, it was possible that the jar could be buried by anyone.

“I have heard that someone lives in this detached building. Is it possible for me to meet them?” Maomao asked.

“…My younger sister lives here. She is sickly and much younger than me. She is fifteen years old. A smart child, but she eats very little and rarely goes outside.”

“Can I examine her condition once?”

Lai glanced at Jinshi.

“Why not? Let her.” Jinshi said.

“Understood.” There was no way he could turn down a proposal from the imperial family.

“I will wait here. It wouldn’t be good for a man to enter a woman’s room.” Jinshi came to a stop at the front of the room. This was a consideration from what women regarded as a fine man. The reality was that it would be troublesome if he were to show his face and they fall for him–it was a reason typical of Jinshi.

Yeah, that’ll be nothing but unpleasant.

“Then, please wait in the room next door.”

Jinshi waited in the room next door. Maomao had Chue accompanying her.

“We’re coming in.” Lai opened the door. There were two women inside.

One was a girl who had a pale complexion. She still had a childish innocence in her features.

The other person was the beauty in her thirties, one of the people who greeted them at the gate just now.

So she’s actually the concubine.

The mother and daughter pair looked similar. If she wasn’t sickly, Hao would have pushed his daughter into the inner palace.

The room was dark. When a candle was lit, it even looked like there were white faces floating.

Perhaps due to the scarce visual information, Maomao’s nose reacted much more sensitively. She caught the smell of honey from the candle, and the smell of medicinal broth from the small teapot. Did it contain components that induced sleep?

Also, she felt a sense of nostalgia from the beauty.

She must have been from the pleasure district and got redeemed.

Her outfit was simple, but her air and the way she dressed herself wasn’t something that could be readily changed. She possessed a sensuality that brought to mind a courtesan’s figure in a dim bedroom. There was no expressed need for Maomao to point that out, so she kept silent.

“The Moon Prince’s company wishes to see Zhizi,” Lai said.

Zhizi!

It was a superb name. Zhizi was gardenia, which was used as a dye, but also as a herbal medicine.

That said, I wonder if they will give me anything as a souvenir.

She was fine with either safflower or gardenia.

“Who is this person?” The beautiful concubine studied Maomao intently.

“She is the herbalist approved by the imperial brother. Do you have any doooubts?” Chue threatened her with a smile.

“Nonsense. However, this child has been visited by many a doctor and she has yet to be cured…” The concubine hugged her daughter gently as she sobbed.

The daughter with lifeless eyes clutched her mother’s arms.

“Please allow me to examine her regardless.” Maomao took Zhizi’s hand. She took the girl’s pulse, and even checked her eyes and tongue.

“…”

When she checked Zhizi’s tongue, she detected a faint smell of milk from the girl.

“…Excuse me, but can I have a cup of tea?” Maomao pointed at the small teapot where the smell of medicinal broth came from.

“Then I will brew it again.”

“No, it is fine as it is. It has a very pleasant smell with a good sleep effect.” Maomao sniffed the air.

“No, these are used up. I will boil up some water and prepare a fresh serving.”

“Thank you.” Maomao accepted the medicinal broth.

I knew it.

She downed the teacup in one go.

“I will prepare the medicine for the daughter’s condition, so may I come over on another day?” Maomao said, looking at Lai.

“That is welcome news for me, but…. Um…” Lai looked at the concubine and her daughter.

It seems the main question was if it was the curse jar.

“I think I will talk about that matter on another day,” Maomao said as she swirled the tea leaves left in the bottom of the teacup.

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Chapter 10

Maomao and the others decided to leave Hao's residence for now.

Unlike the journey to, the carriage was cramped. The reason was Mamei and Chue's presence.

They could probably squeeze in one more person, but Basen wasn't useful, so they left him out.

As it was already late at night, they decided to share information on their way back.

"Now then, how about you give us a recount on what you've noticed?" Jinshi, arms crossed, asked Maomao.

"It will be speculation like always," she said.

"Give us speculation like always."

Maomao thought about how she should broach it, then decided to speak frankly as she had nothing to hide. "The concubine was the one who made the poison, and the daughter was the one who was served the poison."

"Maomao-san, you spoke so directly. How unusuaaal." Chue was rocking herself in time with the carriage.

"The mother to the daughter, is that right?" Mamei confirmed.

"Yes."

"Not every mother has maternal feelings, you knooow." Chue said what Maomao wanted to say.

"Are you certain that she served the poison?" Jinshi asked.

"I cannot declare it outright, but in all possibility, I believe it to be the case." Maomao presented her basis, "The tea I had just now contained several medicinal herbs. It had a sleep-inducing effect, and didn't taste bad either…but it's likely to be the very tea brewed for the poison in question."

If Basen were here, he would be squawking. Unfortunately he wasn't. Jinshi, used to it, was composed with his arms crossed.

"Seeing as you're not all that excited, it doesn't seem like you have ingested poison," he said.

“Just as the Moon Prince said. The concubine brewed up a fresh batch instead of the used up tea for heeer,” Chue said.

“And even if it were ingested, it would not bring out abnormalities to your body as long as you do not take it everyday,” Maomao added. It was ultimately a slow-acting poison. “And the daughter Zhizi-san’s condition has the same symptoms as taking the poison too.”

Maomao looked at Jinshi and Mamei. They looked bewildered. Chue had been with Maomao in that room, so it seems like she was deep into the role of filling in the lacking sections of Maomao’s testimony.

“Maomao remembered the name of a stranger after hearing it once…”

That’s what you’re focused on?!

Even Maomao has remembered names she heard once. Like Wanwan-senpai.

“Why would the mother poison her daughter? Just the reasoning that she didn’t give out the used up tea is too weak.”

It was just as Mamei said. Maomao thought so too.

“As far as I could tell, she didn’t seem like a mother who thought of her daughter. As far as I could teeell.” Chue had some misgivings about the mother.

“The fresh tea she brewed for me was a little bitter. Also, it had catnip,” Maomao said.

“Catnip?” Jinshi asked.

“Yes. There is cat in its name. Its use is close to silver vine. The herb is used as herbal medicine, but just like silver vine, it’s liked by cats.”

“Speaking of cats…”

“Yes.”

Back when she was at the inner palace, there was a detestable calico cat by the name of Maomao that had always gone after the silver vine in the medical office.

“If people touch catnip often, the smell might get on them.”

Which was why the cat found the poison jar.

“But Zhizi-san’s mother didn’t have a reason to harm her daughter. It’ll make more sense if it were the legal wife instead.”

According to advance information, the mother and daughter were neglected. Let alone entering the inner palace, the daughter was forced into a detached building without coming out in public.

“To my eyes, the mother and daughter did not look close.”

“Ahhh, does Maomao-san think so tooo?”

“Yes. That person was less a mother and more a woman to me,” Maomao said bluntly. That was the reason she identified the concubine to be a former courtesan.

The reason Chue had misgivings.

First class courtesans operate by luring in customers. Everything they do is calculated, from the angle they tilt their head to make them look pretty to customers, the flow of their hair, to the movement of their fingers.

The concubine had moved to make herself look the most pitiful to Maomao and the others, the guests. Movements that were very much like the skilled courtesans at the Verdigris Mansion who made themselves look delicate.

“So you mean she was arousing sympathy?” Jinshi asked back, looking like he couldn’t understand.

“Yes. The concubine and her daughter hadn’t been treated as roughly as our prior information told us. If anything, I think they were treated really well.”

The concubine’s attire was the next-most splendid after the lady’s. If she had been neglected, she wouldn’t be allowed to show her face at the imperial brother’s greeting in the first place.

“Same with the daughter. If she had an unknown disease that even doctors have given up on, it would be natural to have her live separately from the main house. I would do the same as it would be scary if it turned out to be infectious. Even the tea she was given had various kinds of herbal medicines. It could not have been cheap.”

Above all, the poison in the jar was made from high-grade tea leaves.

“But the bad rumours…” Jinshi said.

“Honestly, it’s Hao-sama’s wife who did not look well. Suppose there is a concubine who is many years younger and more beautiful around, what would you think? And suppose that

concubine, who is a kind mother who thinks of a daughter, is going around looking sorrowful, what would happen?"

People like to create convenient stories. Apart from the servants who were always in the residence, the guests would probably make up their own stories.

"It is fine if all of it was just to make herself look delicate, but it is not acceptable to use her daughter as a prop."

"By prop, you don't mean that she continued to poison her daughter to beget sympathy from other?"

"I believe that is the most valid reason for the poisoning."

"No way." Jinshi couldn't believe it.

"The senior courtesans are jealous of me. Look at the harm I suffered—there are courtesans who would show their purposely roughly cut hair to customers. Although, it was all done by themselves. This is an extension of that act. She used her daughter to her own advantage and wept to her husband. And her husband would end up feeling compassion for the pitiful woman."

"But the advantage to weakening her daughter by poisoning is too small. Hao-dono has no other daughters. Wouldn't it be wiser to have her enter the inner palace to become a consort?"

"Jinshi-sama, can you easily have a concubine's… a former courtesan's daughter become a high-ranking consort?"

"…" Jinshi couldn't say anything.

Since they controlled the inner palace, the selection of a high-ranking consort was made up of a number of factors.

"With all due respect, didn't you get a lot of opposition when you promoted Empress Gyokuyou to high-ranking consort?" Maomao asked.

Empress Gyokuyou's mother was one of the many wives of Gyoku'en who governed the lands of the west. She was also mixed with western blood, so even now, there were a lot of voices questioning her suitability to be empress.

"I do not know Hao-sama well, but wouldn't he pretend there was no courtesan mother to raise the chance of his daughter becoming a high-ranking consort?"

The daughter was treated as the child of the legal wife instead of the concubine, which was why she was treated as if she didn't exist. It was better to erase the existence of the courtesan who

was in the background. It was better to have the daughter learn the skills of luring in men from her mother, and should she prove useful, have her become the adopted daughter of the legal wife. She could be registered as the legal wife's daughter in the family register from the very start.

And…

Once the daughter entered the inner palace, the courtesan would have served her purpose.

But what if the daughter couldn't enter the inner palace due to poor health?

Maomao had no idea about the personality of the man called Hao. However, even supposing he wasn't a person with deep feelings, he shouldn't be callous enough to give up on his own daughter. Although not to the level of having her come out in public on a brilliant stage, he wouldn't abandon her to starve to death.

"Let's say the concubine was looking for a way to not get abandoned by her husband. If she aroused sympathy from those around her, acted like a devoted mother, and occasionally get compared with the legal wife who is neither young nor beautiful, wouldn't she regain a degree of self-respect?"

Neither Jinshi nor Mamei look like they could believe it. Only Chue was grinning ominously.

Did she think it was the only way for her to live?

Nonetheless, Maomao herself found it really selfish.

It's not a strong poison.

But definitely one that will destroy the body.

"Then, it will be fine if we collect the evidence to confirm that fact tomorrow, riiight?" Chue, who seemed to be really good at gathering evidence, said.

"Yes. There is also one place I want investigated," Maomao said.

"Where would that beee?"

"I want you to investigate the cowshed."

"The cowshed?"

Not only Chue, both Jinshi and Mamei also tilted their heads.
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Chapter 11

The next day, Maomao headed to Hao's residence as soon as she finished her work as a court physician assistant.

Instead of Hao who was absent, perhaps as Jinshi wasn't here today, it was the lady who courteously came to greet them at the door. There were also a few servants, but the concubine in question was nowhere in sight.

"I hear you know who is the culprit," the lady said.

"Yes. We would like to give a detailed explanation, but may we change locations?"

Mamei took charge. Although Chue also came along, it was better to leave it to Mamei.

The lady looked unwell, same as yesterday.

"Come this way." The lady guided Maomao and the others to the parlour.

The lady, an attendant, and Maomao's group of three entered the large room. A guard stood watch by the door outside.

"So you know the truth about the curse jar, right?" The lady's red nose dipped slightly. It seems she was deliberately asking them while knowing the answer.

Mamei looked at Maomao.

Maomao opened her mouth. "It is not a curse jar but a poison one. A substance that, in the guise of an illness, will gradually weaken the person until they succumb. The poison was created from ingredients within reach, and was in the process of aging under the ground."

"Such a thing was buried under the eaves, I see."

So fake, Maomao thought. She thought, but given the lady's position, that was the only thing she could do. "Yes. It was made by Hao-sama's concubine. And her daughter was the one she poisoned."

"…" The lady continued to hang her head. She didn't look shocked.

So she really did know, huh?

The one who had exchanged letters with the empress dowager hadn't been the family head but the lady. What kind of objective did the lady have to go out of her way to ask the empress dowager for advice on the curse jar? And the empress dowager, being who she is, had taken the trouble to send Jinshi over.

"The daughter's name is Zhizi. Was she given the name of a flower related to the family?" Maomao asked.

"That's right. Thanks to that, I am called Suetsumuhana," the lady said.

"Suetsumuhana."

Suetsumuhana is the other name for safflower. The lady touched her red-dyed nose. That alone allowed Maomao to presume that was the reason the woman was called the other name for safflower.

"To think that it's not Zhizi-san's mother, but the lady who is called Suetsumuhana," Maomao said, slightly astonished.

Balsam and wood sorrel.

She recalled the names that were once given on a whim. "Was it to seem like mother and child even if there is no blood relation?"

No, not like this either, huh?

She ended up saying her thoughts out loud. She thought it would sour the mood, but the lady was, surprisingly, taken aback.

"Wh-what are you saying?"

"I know right. What am I saying?" Maomao thought so herself too.

"At least, you are a good person for not being able to abandon Zhizi-san even though you share no blood relation." Maomao extended her hand towards Chue.

"Yes, yes, Maomao-san," Chue said.

"Thank you, Chue-san."

Chue passed a bottle over. Maomao uncapped it and the scent of milk wafted out. “So you even milked the cows in the cowshed.”

“Yes. If not milked well, they get inflamed. More importantly, cow’s milk is nutritious and stimulates physical growth,” the lady said.

“You know a lot.”

“My family originally managed the cows of the inner palace. If I tell you that we had a history, but were reduced to poverty and got absorbed into another family as a result, would you understand?”

So that was why she became Hao’s wife. Considering family history and her knowledge, the advantage to taking her as a wife had been great.

“So you gave this nutritious milk to Zhizi-san.”

“…”

“Aside from symptoms of poisoning, Zhizi-san was showing signs of chronic malnutrition. I hear she is fourteen years of age, but she is much smaller than average. I hear she has been weak since young, but is that the truth?”

“It seems Zhizi-san’s meals are managed by the concubine. I had a short chat with all the cooks on my way to the cowshed, you seeee,” Chue cut in.

“Did you not consider that it was the mean legal wife who poisoned the concubine’s child?” the lady asked.

“If you had thought such a thing, then you probably wouldn’t have gone to the empress dowager about the curse jar. Although the family head is Hao-sama, there is no mistaking that the mistress of this household is you,” Maomao said bluntly.

“The lady’s reputation is really good among the servants. Myyy, what a good laaady,” Chue said.

The lady let out a cynical laugh. “Hahaha. What an odd thing you say. My husband only tells me to not sit next to him at banquets, to show consideration for others from the background. Above of all else, he didn’t even introduce me yesterday either, did he?”

“Yes. However, this household will not run if the lady wasn’t around.”

It seems the previous family head had been a capable person, but the current one was uninspiring. Could the lady’s presence be what was somehow making things work out?

Normally, it wouldn't be possible to act as the intermediary for the family head and the empress dowager when they didn't get along. The woman was that much cultured, Maomao thought.

"And didn't you also give birth to three sons? Myy, aren't you the ideal bride for the family heaaad?" Chue said.

The lady's expression was yet gloomy. Her sense of inferiority towards her own looks was greater than anyone else.

"Shall we return to the topic at hand? The lady would immediately deny it, so I will now just express my opinions. Whether I am right or wrong, you need not to respond," Maomao said.

The lady watched Maomao without moving. Although, it seems as though her complexion had improved slightly.

Maomao talked about the things she told Jinshi and the others yesterday. "She had used her daughter to evoke the family head's compassion. However, the cat ended up finding the poison jar by chance."

The lady closed her eyes.

"When did you start giving Zhizi-san cow's milk? Lady, you need not say anything. I will know once I ask Zhizi-san."

The lady opened her mouth. "…Please do not make children sell out their mothers. I gave that child cow's milk before she turned ten. I had my sons and the servants do it for me."

Did the person not do it herself because she was not fit to be seen?

"My husband is moved by the the woman who weeps that her sickly daughter is pitiful. Yes, weak women, that's what that person likes. He doesn't understand that if you give a child nothing more than watery congee, they wouldn't be any more different from a sick person. He gets told that because she's sick that she gets congee, and he says nothing and nods, even buying expensive herbal medicines to gift her."

Maomao leaned forwards, lips twitching, the moment she heard herbal medicines, but Chue poked her, and she righted her posture.

The lady didn't call the concubine by her name, but referred to her as the woman. She had her opinions about the concubine. "That woman knows very well. She knows very well what my husband likes. In the past, my husband had repeatedly kept concubines, but in the end, that woman was the only one left. The other women were all driven out with consolation money. Perhaps the women who were called to the residence and kept here were truly more loved than

I was. Right when I behaved like the legal wife, it resulted with my husband telling me that he was sick of my haughtiness."

Take responsibility to the end, oi.

If that was a pet, that was what you would say.

But it were a human, it would be considerably kind to simply give them consolation money. Perhaps, it could actually be the lady who gave the consolation money.

"The delicate woman kept coming over as though the family head couldn't lose interest in her. And then, she even used her own daughter.

"Yes. I wanted to believe she had no relation to me. The concubine's child that is an eyesore, who has no blood relation to me either. But I saw it by chance. The skinny child had bent over to try to eat a frog that was hopping on the ground."

Tree frogs are toxic so I advise against eating them.

When the lady, who came from a good family even if it had fallen to ruin, saw the starved child try to eat a live frog that was hopping around, she must have received a great shock.

"By giving her cow's milk in secret these few years, it seems like her condition has improved greatly. However, Zhizi's condition worsened in the last couple of months."

She had wondered why, then discovered the poison jar. And that was when the lady realised that the concubine had given Zhizi some kind of poison.

"Why didn't you inform Hao-sama of his daughter's abuse?" Mamei must have her own views as a mother herself.

"I did inform him. What did you think happened when I did? He asked me if I was the one doing the tormenting. Yes, that's right. My husband sees me as a woman jealous of a concubine that is younger and more beautiful. I pressed the woman about it many times too, but the guests saw and even unsavoury rumours came about." The lady smiled drily.

Was it the concubine good at currying favour, or was Hao shallow? It mattered not.

Hao would call the concubine to his sleeping chambers in place of the lady. The concubine would probably tell him about how the lady would torment her in a reserved and plausible manner while in bed.

"One way or other, I am also one of the causes as to why Zhizi became this weak. I wanted to save that child."

Which was why she came to the empress dowager for advice.

Maomao swirled the bottle of milk. “Zhizi-san is fortunate, isn’t she?”

“In what way?”

“That the lady gave her cow’s milk for nutrition. And as a result, not only did she get nutrition, she also narrowly escaped death.” Maomao swirled the bottle, and it made a sloshing sound.

“Why do you mean by not only did she get nutritiooon?” Chue asked.

“Cow’s milk does not interact well with tea. The milk loses all its nutritious value. To say it conversely, the toxin in tea is weakened when mixed with milk,” Maomao said.

Luomen had weakened the tea poison Maomao drank by giving her milk.

Considering the amount of poison, it wouldn’t be odd for her to be already dead. Considering how Zhizi was still alive, she must have narrowly escaped death due to the cow’s milk.

“But as things stand, that is a chance that she would die if the poison isn’t completely counteracted.”

“How shocking. If she ended up dead, it would be for naught.” Mamei had a sense that there were personal feelings involved.

“I guess so.”

The weaker the daughter became, the more compassion the concubine received. She would do anything to become the leading actress of a tragedy.

“What does the lady want the Moon Prince to do?”

Did she want to tell Jinshi to do something about the concubine? Or…

“Can he take Zhizi into his care?” the lady asked.

“Do you understand the implications of that?” Mamei asked without a moment’s delay.

Telling an imperial to take the daughter into his care could only be taken as telling him to marry her.

“Yes. I understand how disrespectful it is. Even if he were to take her in as an attendant, Zhizi’s existence would have to be a hindrance. This child as of now doesn’t have the capacity nor the strength to work as an attendant.”

“Then, why did you bring up such a thing?”

“Zhizi cannot give birth to children. My husband had wondered if she truly couldn’t enter the inner palace. He had a doctor check up on her.”

“…” Mamei fell silent.

The daughter of a powerful person was ultimately a piece for political marriages. Even Mamei who appeared free understood that fact.

“All of this is the result of this family’s misconduct,” the lady forced herself to say.

“To make amends for Zhizi-san, you want the Moon Prince to take her into custody. Mmmm, honestly, I don’t see there being any merit for the Moon Priiince.”

It was as Chue said.

“The Moon Prince visited Hao-sama’s residence. Then, he took his daughter into his care. To an onlooker, they would only see it as the Moon Prince, who has yet to have a concubine, having taken a liking to Hao-sama’s daughter and sought to marry her,” Mamei also said.

That’s how it’ll turn out, yeah.

Hao would have to be overjoyed no matter the form. The imperial brother who lacked any juicy gossip had taken a liking to his daughter.

“What does Maomao-san thiiink?” Chue whispered into Maomao’s ear as she elbowed her.

Good question.

Does Chue want to see Maomao jealous?

Unfortunately she didn’t think that way.

“I think I would feel bad for Zhizi-san if she were to get any strange hopes.”

“Hm, in short, you’re implying that the Moon Prince won’t be drawn to other women, huuuh?”

You always have the last word.

Maomao decided to say nothing more.

It seems the lady had expected the answer. She lightly nodded in agreement. “The empress dowager also told me the same thing. However, there is one advantage to it.”

“What kind of advantage?”

“She could be used as grounds to ward off the ever increasing annoying marriage talks from now on.”

It seems as though Mamei and Chue’s ears grew.

“Ahh, my word.”

“That might be appealing.”

The two of them glanced at Maomao.

“But the fact that she has a selfish mother is an issue.”

“I will not send that woman with her,” the lady declared. “I doubt my husband would compel even the concubine. That woman would surely object, but there is no way that she could go against it.”

There was no way that a concubine Hao doted on could even weigh up against the imperial brother.

“It is likely that the others would change the way they think about my husband, but that is all temporary. His footing isn’t as solid as the Gyoku family. Even if it increases the weight of my family a little, it shouldn’t make a large difference to the power dynamic.”

“Nngh,” Mamei groaned. It seems the lady wasn’t entirely wrong.

I knew the lady is smart, Maomao though.

“Even so, there’s too little advantages to thiiiis,” Chue said.

“I have three sons. I believe all of them are outstanding, but they have reserved personalities and will not forget gratitude. Besides, they don’t have the character to have wild ambitions like my husband does,” the lady said.

“What are you implying?”

“The family head may look young, but he is fifty-five this year. He might live for another decade, perhaps?”

She was saying that the next family head will pledge his allegiance to Jinshi.

So she isn’t a wife that only supports her husband, huh?

The lady had been far-sighted, confident that she would get the final triumph.

Which was why she continued to endure even in misfortune.

“We cannot simply give you an answer,” Mamei said.

In the end, they left taking the answer back with them.

Chapter 12

“My goodness, it’s turned into such a troublesome matter, hasn’t iiit?” Chue, her younger sister-in-law, said in a carefree manner.

This was after they sent Maomao back to the dorms following their departure from Hao’s residence.

They alighted from the carriage and headed for the Moon Prince’s palace.

“What are we to do with the report to the Moon Prince?” Chue asked.

“Since we told them that we’d bring it back, we must report it.” Mamei sighed heavily. If only Maomao made some response then, but it wasn’t like Mamei could go as far as to force the other woman to do so. Chue was better suited at inciting this sort of thing, but she had sent Maomao back immediately after. “And here I thought you would bring Maomao-san all the way to the Moon Prince, Chue-san.”

“Maomao-san has work tomorrow. Even Chue-san has her reservations on this, you knooow.”

“Reservations?”

Mamei and Chue had known each other before the latter's marriage, so they would end up speaking like friends once they were alone together.

"What do you think will happen if the Moon Prince asks Maomao for her opinion? How would you take it, Mamei-san, if Bakin-san is told to treat a woman as a concubine, even if it's just for form's sake?"

"Ahhh…" Mamei understood. "I would really hate it."

"Riiight? Saying that you respect your partner's opinions and asking them is ultimately an excuse. Chue-san can only see that as shifting responsibility."

"Yup, exactly."

Men would see it as respecting their partner. Women would see it as shifting responsibility. A difference in views would result in a disagreement. And reconciliation was not necessarily accepting it, even if you did understand the other party's position.

"Maomao-san wouldn't particularly care either way. Honestly, I think she also understands the advantages very well. When you consider whatever Lady Safflower was thinking, it doesn't seem like a bad move," Chue said.

"You think so? I found that there were more issues with it, though," Mamei said.

Chue squinted her small eyes into a smile. "Lady Safflower said she didn't know if her husband would be alive in a decade's time."

"Yes. Could she possibly mean that she would poison to her husband?"

The two of them spoke in hushed tones, but didn't give out definite names. It was a conversation over-hearers wouldn't understand.

"Even if it wasn't the lady, don't you think someone else would do it?" Chue said.

"By someone else… next would be her son, or could it be—" Mamei asked.

"What would the concubine do, now that she has lost the tool that's her daughter that she had used to improve her standing? She would start raising another small animal, riiight?" Chue was familiar with the darkness of the human mind, more so than Mamei.

"So you mean the concubine would poison her husband next?"

"Yes. In fact, Chue-san has looked into where that concubine came from prior to joining this household." Chue's intelligence capability was much greater than Mamei.

Mamei was slightly jealous of her eccentric yet capable sister-in-law. At the same time, she thought that her being able to raise children properly, unlike Chue who didn't even try to hug her own child, was a proof of her blessings.

"Maomao-san's nose is amaaazing. The concubine was actually a courtesan. And not only that, she had been knowledgeable in medicine since back then," Chue said, while making the characteristic sound of her footfalls. "She was popular, being a courtesan who was both beautiful and well-versed in herbal medicines. In particular, there were stories of regulars coming for her in less than three daays."

Chue placed her index finger over her lips. "Could she have cast some sort of spell?"

"Spell?"

"It is a western spell to prevent unfaithful husbands. Every morning, you would add a tiny amount of a delayed-onset poison into your husband's meal, and then give him the antidote when he returns at night. If he were to ever have an affair and stay out for the night, he would remain unweeell." Chue was knowledgeable of the West. "There is also method where you don't use poison but a drug. If so, they would return without waiting for three days."

Mamei broke out in cold sweat over Chue's speculation.

"After a brilliant herbalist came to the pleasure district at some point in time, her customers traffic dropped and she later got redeemed, you seee."

"Could that be…"

"Yes. It was the time when Maomao-san's dad, Luomen, arrived at the pleasure district. The woman must have done all sorts of things, but when a decent herbalist came, she must have thought that she couldn't conduct shady business practices anymore while she was at the large store known as Verdigris Mansion, even though it had fallen into hard times back theeen." Chue crossed her arms and nodded sagely.

Mamei was also aware of Maomao-san's personal history. Considering how Maomao didn't know the concubine, she must not have been old enough to remember. "Why didn't you talk about this before Maomao-san?"

"Would talking about it have helped?"

Mamei was at a loss at Chue's excuse. Speaking of who it would have helped, it was Hao.

"Maomao-san doesn't want to talk about speculation. She would be troubled if we talk about things that change speculation into conviction, you seee."

The concubine had surely cast a spell to prevent Hao from escaping. Whatever the kind of spell, Hao was bound to gradually weaken.

Maomao must be troubled about whether she should speak the truth or keep it to herself.

“Chue-san doesn’t hate villains. After all, we know what kind of people are the fools who try to be upriiight.”

The person responsible for the reason Chue couldn’t use her right arm anymore was someone who had been particular about judging criminals under the law.

“We just have to wait a decade, riiight?” Chue said.

Mamei understood why the lady didn’t attempt to drive the concubine out with her daughter.

There was no love or hate in this. She was just using the existence of the concubine as a tool.

It didn’t mean that there were no feelings from the lady at the very start. Just that, at least, there were none now.

It was Hao himself who caused it.

“Lady Safflower actually wanted to do it, you knooow. Although she can’t rely on her sons yet, they would be more dependable than her husband, and if they’re not greedy, it should be peaceful for some time. The Gyoku clan aren’t that belligerent, so it would be a good topic to hold the third parties in check.”

While they chatted, they arrived at the Moon Prince’s palace.

Basen, her younger brother, was standing in the front of the room.

“Has the Moon Prince returned?” Mamei asked.

“Yes.” Basen guided them into the room.

The Moon Prince was scanning over the documents that seem to the remainder of his work. The lack of Suiren’s presence must mean that she was preparing dinner.

“Mamei, is it? How did it go?” the Moon Prince asked.

“Yes.”

Mamei and Chue gave their reports. Perhaps due to Suiren’s absence, Chue interrupted often.

As expected, the Moon Prince was troubled over the lady's proposal. "Hao's lady is capable," he said.

"What will you do?" Mamei asked, and waited for the Moon Prince's response. Whether he accepted or turned it down, it was fine. He had that much power as the imperial brother.

"What should we do? How about we ask Maomao for details on treatment?" he replied.

"What?" Mamei found herself raising her voice.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing… So you mean you will be taking in Hao-sama's daughter?"

"Wouldn't that girl die sooner or later if I didn't?"

That might be the case but Mamei was boiling over in anger. "Isn't there another way? The Moon Prince need not take her in. We can just separate the daughter from the concubine, can we not?" she ended up saying such, even though she had decided to bring this matter back for the time being due to its slight advantages. "Does the Moon Prince mean to cede your own troublesome matters to Maomao-san?"

"SISTER!

Mamei ignored Basen who tried to stop her. "In the first place, there is also the empress dowager! Why hasn't she taken the girl in herself? Isn't it strange that she is foisting this troublesome matter onto the Moon Prince?"

The Moon Prince exhaled. "Do you think Hao would listen to the empress dowager, my mother? You should know that Hao-dono regards the empress dowager as his sister first and foremost."

"However…"

The man called Hao would certainly act with that in mind. He was sure to look down on the empress dowager for being the daughter of a concubine.

"But above being his nephew, I am the imperial brother. The matter was brought to me in the consideration that he would listen if it were from me."

"However, I have qualms about doing something that would make Hao forget himself."

"But Maomao would choose to save the girl over abandoning her, right?"

Mamei's jaw dropped and she looked at the Moon Prince.

"I understand very well what Mamei wants to tell me. It would be fine if it's something that won't make Hao forget himself, right?" The Moon Prince gave a big stretch. "From how it's looking, did you think I was going to support her as a concubine even for form's sake?"

"Was I wrong?" That was how Mamei heard it entirely from Hao's lady.

"Mother probably feels bad for her niece. Has Mamei forgotten the kind of things my mother did in the past?"

"The kind of things?"

The empress dowager was famous for being a benevolent person. She created a place of belonging for the late emperor's chosen and abolished the surgery to create new eunuchs as well as slavery. Normally, these wouldn't be easily achievable even for someone in the position of empress dowager, but it was all ultimately implemented by the emperor in consideration of his mother.

That being said, what resulted from those were…

By gathering the late emperor's chosen, she supported the Shi clan's rebellion.

The ageing of the eunuchs wasn't an issue at present with the downsizing of the inner palace. However, it was difficult to gather more eunuchs to supplement their numbers as the only castrated people were the slaves of foreign tribes.

The abolition of slavery. Although it was officially vanquished, it was operating under a different form. The numbers have fallen, but it was now going around in a more insidious manner.

It was not necessarily the case that the empress dowager was completely benevolent.

In ages past, she would probably be known as a villainess. However, as she existed in the same era as the empress regnant who puppeteered her son and the vixen who tried to ruin the country, she had been overshadowed.

Mamei thought about all the things the empress dowager had done until now, and felt that her taking in a niece was still charming.

And it seems the Moon Prince knew how to deal with the matter too.

"The girl has a weak constitution from malnutrition and poison, right? We'll just have to do something about the pitiful girl that even doctors had given up on," he said.

“Yes,” Mamei said.

“In other words, we can just send her to a place that would give her plenty of nutrients, has people well-versed in medical treatment, and that even Hao-dono can say nothing about, right?”

“Ahhh.” Chue clapped her hands together. “There is. One such place.”

“Chue-san, could it be—” Mamei asked.

“They have fresh crops growing in the garden, or should I say field, that are high in nutrition. They have, for some reason, freeloaders who are well-versed in matters related to mediciiine.”

“Above all, it is close to her original home,” the Moon Prince said.

Mamei finally understood where they were referring to. “Do you mean to send her to Rakan-sama’s place?”

“Yeah,” the Moon Prince said.

“But Rakan-sama isn’t the type to do such charity…” No, Mamei heard that he would take in brilliant people from who-knows-where. However, Hao’s daughter was just sickly—she couldn’t see her possessing any talent that Rakan would discover.

“If it’s Rakan-sama, he wouldn’t care even if there are one or two more freeloaders.” Chue understood.

“His adoptive son is Rahan, right? If it’s him, he would take her in if it’s orders from the Moon Prince.”

“Hahaha, a different trouble might arise, howeveeeer.” Chue let out an all-knowing laugh. “Come to think of it, it seems like Rahan’s older brother is starting to grow a new vegetable. Why don’t we go eat it next time?”

“I-if it’s a tuber, I don’t want it,” the Moon Prince said.

“It seems to be a fruit instead. A round red fruit, but its season might be over alreadyyy.” Chue stuck out her tongue.

Based on what she could tell with Chue’s reaction, would this truly be the solution?

As Mamei thought such, she thought it was pointless to worry over it excessively.

Chapter 13

At Rakan's residence, the sounds of soil being tilled filled the air.

The sight caught me by surprise in the beginning, but I'm used to it now, Junjie thought.

Rahan's older brother was ploughing the fields. He ploughed the fields all throughout his time at the western capital, and he was doing so even at the imperial capital. Moreover, it was in a garden within an estate in a prime location, right in the heart of the imperial capital.

Junjie had his reservations about ploughing at Gyoku'en's residence in the western capital. However, the landscaping of the garden was irrelevant during times of emergency food shortage due to the locust plague. The figure of the man single-mindedly producing crops for the people had been magnificent, he thought, but…

Isn't he overdoing it? he started to think.

Junjie was told that Rahan's older brother's name wasn't Rahan. The man was the older brother of Rahan, whom was apparently the son of the master of this estate. Then would that make Rahan's older brother be his son too? he had asked, but when told that he was wrong, Junjie, a commoner, could only tilt his head in confusion at the complicated familial relation.

Speaking of complicated, the relation of the people in this residence was also complicated.

"Heeey, Junjie."

Sifan called out to him in a friendly tone. The child was an orphan picked up by the master of the estate, relatively close in age to Junjie. She was actually a few years younger, but he didn't feel much of an age gap since she was clever. Wufan and Liufan were by her side as always. Their strange names were to make it easier for the master who picked them up, but Junjie thought it made them sound like criminals.

But surprisingly, the people in question seem to like it.

The three of them were carrying cleaning equipment like brooms and buckets.

"What is it?" Junjie asked.

"Looks like we'll be getting another freeloader. We've been told to prepare the room for them to stay at. Give us a hand," Sifan said.

Junjie didn't get idle since Sifan always gave him work to do.

"Got it. Did Rakan-sama bring someone in?" he asked.

"Nah, it's Rahan-sama this time. The Moon Prince requested him to look after a sick person," she said.

"Oh?"

Junjie followed after Sifan and the others. Rakan's residence had a lot of unused rooms for its size. The estate was built to be large because it had been around since the relocation of the capital, but there were too many empty rooms since there were few Ra blood relatives and barely any servants too.

Sifan headed for one of the outbuildings. "This' the place."

There was another outbuilding nearby.

"Isn't it close to Yao-sama and En'en-sama's room?" Junjie asked.

"That's right."

"It's a sick person, but would it be okay to have them so close to a guest's room?"

"Yao-sama and En'en-sama are court physician assistants, right? In times like this we'll have them work for us. I mean, they are paying us, but I kinda don't understand why they're here."

"I think so too."

"Anyway, an underling has one thing to do. And that is to complete what we are told to do in no time."

Under Sifan's guidance, they started to clean the outbuilding. The building may be small, but it had a toilet at close proximity and had good sunlight too.

"Sifan, the wall has a hole." Wufan pointed at the hole.

"Then we'll check for all the spots that need repairs. We'll report to Sanfan-neesan later and get them fixed," Sifan said.

"Got it."

"–It," Liufan echoed Wufan.

“Would it get cold if we plug up the hole as well?”

“If they’re a sick person, it might be better if we prepare them something like a brazier instead,” Junjie said as he swept the floor. There were spots here and there that bothered him, but the interior was surprisingly clean.

“Yeah, floor heating would have been nice, but they don’t have it here in the imperial capital.” Sifan said.

“Floor heating?”

“Rich families in the north have it.”

“The floor gets really warm,” Wufan said.

“–Warm,” Liufan echoed again.

Liufan’s language skills were poor for his age. According to what Junjie heard, Wufan and Liufan were picked up by Rakan after Sifan was, so if Sifan hadn’t been around, these two might have already died by the roadside, Junjie thought.

Junjie opened the window. When he did so, he saw bright red things fill his vision.

“Woah!” Junjie yelled out in shock. For a moment he thought the garish red colours were lumps of meat or blood, but upon closer look they were fruits.

“Ahh, those,” Sifan said.

“What Rahan’s older brother dried.” Wufan said.

“–Dried.” said Liufan.

Junjie knew them too. There had been strange red fruit seedlings being planted and grown during summer. Although Rahan’s older brother had called them a vegetable, they remind me of jujubes, Junjie thought.

Rahan’s older brother’s father had apparently ordered them for ornamental purposes, but since they were edible, they were cultivating them as food. It had a high water content, was sour and could be eaten raw, boiled or grilled. Rahan’s older brother later continued the research, and it seems he was now testing to see if it could be processed into a dried food.

Junjie thought that a farmer acknowledged by even the Moon Prince does things differently indeed.

“Heeey.” Right on cue, Rahan’s older bother came up with a hoe in hand. “Sorry, it’s still in the process of drying. Will you be using this outbuilding?”

Rahan’s older brother was dripping with sweat. He had just finished with his work. It was already the season for frost, and yet he was lightly dressed, his skin flushed.

When they were at the western capital, he clearly worked in only his underwear, but he hadn’t sported that look since coming to the imperial capital. His reasoning was that he couldn’t dress like that before young ladies.

Are Maomao and Chue not considered young ladies? Junjie thought.

“Are they drying well? Not much longer perhaps. I’ll pack it away for now.” Rahan’s older brother picked up the red fruits one by one to check if they had dried.

“I’ll help you,” Junjie said.

“Okay. If I can’t use this building, then we’ll carry it to the storehouse over there.”

It looks like they were cleaning the outbuilding because Rahan’s older brother had been using it as a storehouse. He had also used it to store farming tools, so they will need to make a few round trips.

“Is there yet another guest coming?” Rahan’s older brother asked.

“Yes. A sick person will be joining us. The Moon Prince’s orders,” Junjie said.

“A sick person, huh? Then, I’ll have to feed them a lot of vegetables. Do you know what kind of illness they have?”

“I didn’t hear that far.”

When they came back after carrying all the red fruits to the storehouse, Yao and En’en have returned.

Rahan’s older brother immediately tidied up his appearance and smoothed over his expression. He was good looking, but his actions looked vaguely ridiculous. “En’en-saaan!”

The two of them have returned to the outbuilding. Yao and En’en’s working hours didn’t coincide often, so En’en generally waited for Yao.

“Ju– Rahan’s older brother.” En’en looked at Junjie, then corrected herself.

“Are you done with work? If you are tired, how about I prepare you vegetables that would help you recover from exhaustion and make your skin beautiful?” Rahan’s older brother leaned against the detached building’s pillar with a smile.

“Thank you very much. It would be great if you could leave it by the kitchen like always.”

“Understood!”

Junjie has witnessed this exchange many times. And he decided against mentioning that it was more a conversation between a cook and a supplier. Everyone wanted to say it. Even Sifan, Wufan, and Liufan were on the verge of making quips–it wasn’t what Junjie as the newcomer could bring up.

“Is there anything bothering you?” Rahan’s older brother then asked.

“Let’s see. It’s gotten cold, so I would love to have spices that could warm the body, if you have any of the sort,” En’en said.

“Understood. Maomao had requested me for ginger so I’ll bring that over too. Also, there is an interesting ingredient that I’ve grown–I’ll bring that too.”

He was taking orders, full stop. We have to switch to daily conversations now, Junjie thought, but Rahan’s older brother was only recommending vegetables.

“Hello, Rahan’s older brother. Thank you for your vegetables as always,” Yao said.

“No worries. I’m just doing what I enjoy.” Rahan’s older brother responded naturally to Yao’s thanks.

En’en was staring at Rahan’s older brother intently, looking like she was making sure of something.

“By the way, have you heard that a sick person will be coming to this outbuilding?”

“Yes, we have a letter from Maomao with various instructions. Most importantly, it seems she is malnourished, so we’ll be having her eat a lot of Rahan’s older brother’s produce,” Yao said.

Was it his imagination that the way Yao spoke to Rahan’s older brother was more proper than En’en?

At least, she was speaking to him as a neighbour, not a supplier.

“The letter says the patient is still a fourteen year old girl, so we’ll have to look after her properly,” En’en said.

“A fourteen year old girl… We must keep her far away from that Rahan rascal at all costs!” Rahan’s older brother’s gaze grew sharp.

“That’s right. We must keep Rahan-sama far away from here at all costs.”

It looked like En’en had made a different resolution.

“En’en, I don’t think we can say anything since we’re freeloaders. But if we have a sick person coming, he’d rely on us, wouldn’t he?” Yao said bashfully.

Junjie, having stayed at Rakan’s residence for half a year, had his thoughts.

The woman called Yao may look mature, but she was mentally immature. This could be attributed to her good upbringing, but En’en, her follower, was to blame in further restricting her knowledge of the outside world.

This was why she worries over her own actions while acting recklessly. Speaking of how Junjie could assess Yao with this much detail, it was Sifan. Sifan was more mature than her actual age, so she was good at reading the subtleties of other people’s hearts. She’s quite capable as a servant, he thought.

The conversations related to Yao couldn’t be said in the presence of the other adults, Sanfan especially, and Wufan and Liufan were much too young. As a result, she would talk to Junjie often. As a result, he became knowledgeable of the personal relationships within the estate.

“Yao-san. It’s a great help that you are thinking of how you can be useful to others, but if Rahan is forcing you to do so, let me know. That curly-haired cold-blooded glasses is my younger brother after all. I’ll tell him off for you.”

“No, he’s not forcing me.”

“Then you can be more at ease. Otherwise, you’ll end up tiring yourself out because of the patient that will be coming now. If it’s out of a sense of obligation, we can arrange for other doctors, can’t we? Since it’s the Moon Prince’s request, they’ll be paying us as much as we want. What’s more, we can call for Maomao. Granduncle Luomen comes back every so often too. You can relax,” Rahan’s older brother said and slapped Yao’s shoulder.

Yao, although surprised, didn’t seem discomforted by Rahan’s older brother and smiled lightly.

En’en watched them with a sullen look. Apparently it was within permissible range.

Sifan came up beside Junjie. “Not going as planned, is it?” she muttered.

“What is not going as planned?” Junjie asked.

“Nah, the direction of the arrow has only shifted a little. It seems to be progressing really smoothly. It would be easier to have Sanfan-neesan dealt with too, however.”

“Is that so?”

As Sifan shook her head as if to say, “Not going as planned,” she dumped out the filthy washing water from the bucket.

Chapter 14

Maomao was at the weirdo tactician’s residence.

She honestly didn’t want to come, but she had to.

“You’re a part of this, I see.”

“Rather than a part of this, I was forced to take part.”

“Isn’t it always like that?” Yao who came to greet Maomao made a look of surprise.

Today, both Yao and En’en were on break, and Maomao specially took leave as well. People might raise an eyebrow at having three court physician assistants take a day off together, but it can’t be helped. What’s more, when Court Physician Liu was told that it was the imperial brother’s orders, he agreed to her leave with a look of disgust. Since the old court physician, that is Court Physician Lao, has headed for the smallpox front-lines, she had to get all sorts of permissions from Court Physician Liu.

Maomao wanted the old court physician to return soon.

“Anyway, come this way. Essentially, En’en and I will be looking after her. Luomen-sama would be coming shortly, it seems,” Yao said.

“Do you know when?”

Maomao also rarely saw Luomen. He pretty much resided in the inner palace. Although eunuchs didn’t face as many restrictions as palace ladies did when it came to entering and exiting the inner palace, he must be holding back from leaving as there were new high-ranking consorts and the quack doctor wasn’t dependable.

“I wonder. I heard it would be in a few days’ time.”

Maomao made a sullen face. She wanted to see Luomen, but not the weirdo tactician. She wondered what she should do. “Well, for the time being, where is the patient?”

“She is near our outbuilding. En’en is currently preparing meals, but…”

“But?”

“Is that child, really a young lady from a good family?” A look of disbelief faced Maomao.

“Umm, I believe the patient is a fourteen year old malnourished girl.”

“That is certainly the case.” Yao eyed the outbuilding.

“You cannot!”

That shriek belonged to En’en. Maomao blinked in surprise. That woman never raised her voice.

Maomao and Yao rushed over to the outbuilding where the patient was.

And there was a panicked En’en raising a large pot high over her head. Zhizi was clinging onto the woman, trying to snatch away that pot. There were traces of congee around the girl’s mouth.

“She is more of a starved feral child than a young lady raised in tender care,” Yao said.

“So I see,” Maomao said.

Come to think of it,

She did hear that Zhizi had been so starved she once tried to eat a frog in the garden.

“She looked a little more prudent to me, though.”

“Where?”

She had been quite weakened from malnutrition and poison when Maomao met her the other day. Looks like she just hadn’t been resisting due to her declined health.

“Don’t just watch. Do something!” En’en said.

Maomao and Yao hurried to pull Zhizi off En’en. That once-quiet girl let out an incredible beast-like groan.

“Food. Food. Please!”

Zhizi’s voice was child-like but pressing. The moment Maomao saw the girl’s ribs from her opened nightgown and her stick-thin arms and legs, she no longer wanted to let the girl eat her fill.

Maomao, Yao, and En’en wanted to do what they could. And an expert who was related to supplying food to one more person was also watching stealthily.

“Will you not feed her?” Rahan’s older brother said with a look of anxiousness. The basket carried over his back contained root vegetables.

“As much as we would love to feed her, we can’t,” Maomao said.

“Why not?”

“She could die if you suddenly give her sustenance while she’s in a state of starvation.”

“Die?!” Rahan’s older brother surreptitiously put away the turnip he was about to take out.

“Yes. A long time ago, a castle had its supply of food cut off by the enemy…”

Hit by starvation tactics, the people were forced into famine. When the starved were finally released, they devoured congee with wild abandon. Then they dropped like flies.

It was a story she heard from Dad. She also instructed Yao and En’en through the letter. En’en was faithfully playing her part.

“Couldn’t it be because the congee was poisoned?”

“Not at all. Those who ate the congee slowly survived. While I do not know the cause, could it be that their stomachs had gone into the highest state of shock?”

“I won’t be able to get over dying from shocking your stomach.” Rahan’s older brother set the basket of turnips in a place out of sight. Zhizi’s blazing eyes were looking around for food.

“And so, with her current condition, she could die if she eats as much as she wants. We will be increasing her portion little by little, so please endure.”

However, Maomao and Yao were holding Zhizi back as the girl reached for the pot of congee. “I have to eat now. I don’t know when it’s the next time I get to eat!”

“You will get to eat! I’ll give it to you for lunch in two dual-hour’s time!”

The girl didn't believe En'en. Zhizi was like a stray dog who wasn't done being fed. That alone was enough to tell all the long years she had suffered.

I can't abandon her.

Maomao thought she had gone soft. There were so many starving children in the world. If Maomao saved them all, she herself would die a dog's death. Thus, she had decided to abandon them and turn a blind eye.

And now, the reason she couldn't abandon Zhizi was because if it was just the girl alone, she could save her at least.

Maomao took out a dried cuttlefish from her bosom pocket. "Please chew on this and endure for the time being."

"AH!" Zhizi took the dried cuttlefish from Maomao and started to chew on it like a dog with a bone.

"Whew." En'en took away the remainder of the congee.

Rahan's older brother left in a hurry as if he thought he said too much. He mostly likely came over with vegetables as support because En'en was there, but it wasn't the time for it.

"Then, get a good sleep. I'll wake you up when it's time for food."

Zhizi showed no indications of having heard or not. She was intently licking the dried cuttlefish. Maomao wanted interview the child, but it would be better if she was little more calm.

There was a table and chairs in front of the patient's room. Maomao and Yao automatically went to sit on the chairs.

"Are you monitoring her?" Maomao asked.

"Yes, you'd have to with how she is. We caught her heading over to the kitchen last night," Yao said.

A hopeless problem child.

Maomao felt apologetic, but Yao didn't look annoyed.

"Yao-san." Maomao made sure that En'en wasn't around. With how meticulous that woman was, she was probably scrubbing the pot clean. "I think you have been at this residence for long enough. Do you have any thoughts about it?"

“That’s quite a roundabout way of putting it.” Yao stretched widely. “I don’t know myself either. I don’t know, but I’m stuck. Then I think about how I can make myself leave at this stage… but I somehow get so frustrated I can’t do it.”

Maomao also stretched widely. Normally she would be in the opposite position. Chue would be the one asking Maomao.

It would be nice if Chue-san could do this for me.

Maomao thought, but Chue probably wouldn’t do it. While Chue talked because it was Maomao, she probably won’t talk to Yao. The woman got carried away and was agreeable to anyone, but beyond Maomao, she dealt with human relationships logically.

And Yao didn’t know Chue either. She wouldn’t necessarily lend an ear to Chue’s words.

Maomao was also worried over whether her own words reached Yao. But Yao, in her own way, was more mature than she was in the past.

“Maomao would have probably already realised, but I’ll be honest. I’m happy that Zhizi-san came here. It’s a lot of work, but I end up thinking that it’s fine for me to be here because of her. I am a hopeless, immature person with bad thoughts. While I complain that it’s a lot of work, I think if Zhizi-san is hopeless, it’ll be even better for me.” Yao spoke softly. It was at a volume that Zhizi who was at the back of the room couldn’t hear.

Yao may seem dignified, but apparently she had no self-confidence. Hence she sought to be depended upon to gain self-confidence. It’s fine if she’s self-aware, Maomao thought.

Maomao had an idea where Yao’s lack of self-confidence stemmed from.

The incident with the Sha’ou priestess, huh.

Yao had previously been the food taster for the Sha’ou priestess. Consequently, her organs were damaged as a result of the priestess’s scheme and even now she could no longer eat foods with strong flavours.

Yao had been used. She wasn’t at fault. But due to political decisions, she was forced to take on a bad reputation.

The Sha’ou priestess who survived was officially treated as deceased. She stayed behind in Li, and will not appear on the centre stage from now on.

Consequently, Yao became someone who failed at food tasting and had an important person from a foreign country die. Since Yao's life was also in danger at one point, no one would openly criticise her. But the one who felt the most responsibility was Yao.

I can't say anything either.

Maomao couldn't speak the truth. It would be good if she could, but she mustn't.

"I understand what Maomao is trying to say. I, too, will be leaving this estate once Zhizi-san gets better," Yao said.

"Is that so?"

"But don't tell En'en yet, please. She may rush Zhizi-san who needs the time to recover slowly." Yao viewed En'en with composure. Yao wasn't going to stay the same forever too.

"I think Yao-san is doing well." Maomao could only tell her like this.

The girl was only seventeen years old. She had a variety of paths open to her, and yet she became a court physician assistant in defiance of her uncle.

Honestly, the path was filthy, stinky and tough. She was walking the exact opposite path of other court ladies who were working in the imperial court for bridal training. She didn't admit defeat immediately and still continued with it, even now practicing so that she would be taught surgery.

"Yao-san is better off going to more places. Meet all sorts of people, get all sorts of experience. But being a court physician assistant, I think you have a lot more experience than normal women, though."

At her current location, Yao didn't realise that she was capable herself. Honestly, if she went to other departments, she would probably be regarded highly in no time.

"I can't fly about like Maomao does."

Is that how you take me as?

It seems Yao had no intention of leaving the doctor's path.

"Well, there is an aspect of me that is somewhat like a jack of all trades." Maomao would have preferred to be a little more grounded, but she was just flying about. She didn't get called up this time since it was related to smallpox, but she had no idea what could come up next.

She couldn't make up her mind about whether she should talk to Yao about things that were more sensitive, but she decided to stop here. If she spoke too much, it would be a mistake. This

was something Maomao messed up often. “I wonder if Yo-san who disappeared off somewhere is doing okay right now.”

“She went to the smallpox site, didn’t she? I heard Yo won’t contract it, though.”

“…Yes. She has contracted it before.”

“So she always wears long sleeves because she contracted smallpox before.” Yao gave a huge sigh. “Would they let me join them if I contract it once?”

“It’s better you stop here. There’s no safe way to contract smallpox.”

So far.

Maomao recalled the man who covered half of his grinning face. Kokuyou would have gone to the same location as Yo and the others.

It would be groundbreaking if they could catch smallpox via Kokuyou’s master’s method.

If that were possible, they wouldn’t have as much hardship as now.

Let’s try sending a letter to Kokuyou.

She didn’t know if she would get a reply, but Maomao wanted a different perspective than the regular correspondence from the court physicians.

Chapter 15

Dear Maomao-san,

With regards to Zhizi-san, she can finally eat the normal amount of food. Now that she can eat properly, she has calmed down a lot and has evolved from a stray dog to a puppy-in-training.

At first, I thought an impossible child has been sent in, but now that she is eating well, she seems obedient. Although, I believe that is a given since she's eating what Yao-sama personally cooked herself.

Lately, she does not just use the knife, but she can even cook now, but I personally would offer to do all the cooking for her.

Also, Yao-sama is finally receptive to moving out, so we're in the middle of looking for property. Since we still have Zhizi-san's matter, I believe we won't be leaving Rakan-sama's residence considering public order until after the new year, but it is a big step.

We'll inform you once we've decided on a place.

From En'en.

En'en is still the same, Maomao thought.

Yao wants to be independent. Would she invite En'en to where she would be moving to?

To Maomao,

Long time no seee. You were my reference for my job so I thought I should send you a letter, and so I did.

Yup, it's pretty terrible at the site. All the villagers are clamouring to leave as soon as possible. It's quite heart-wrenching. You ask if Yo is alright? Yup, she's pretty worn out so she'll be coming back for now. She still wants to keep going, but it should be fine for her to spend the new year with her family at least, riiight?

Court Physician Lao, was it? He's a great person. He was receptive to the idea of having Yo return for now. What an understanding grandpa.

When Yo gets back, I'll leave her to you. Unless Maomao isn't okay with it, then I won't send her your way. I'll be coming back with her, so an inn, please. The court physicians will prepare the necessary expenses for this at least.

Also, I have a question. Would you happen to know a place near the capital that has a lot of cows and horses?

From Kokuyou

“So Yo-san and Kokuyou are coming back.”

Yo must be finding the work tough. She will have to stay in the capital until she recovers her spirit like Kokuyou said.

Even so, what was that about cows and horses? Red Plum Mansion fits the criteria, so it should be fine if I introduce that place to him, she thought as she set down the letter from Kokuyou.

Maomao-san, Maomao-san,

Why, Chue-san shall showcase a special product to you.

Now, come, come, please take a look. Chue-san will showcase each and every item that won over her husband. There are easy-to-understand illustrations included–

Maomao ripped up the letter without reading the rest and dumped it into the brazier.

Dear Sis,

Taking custody of Hao-sama’s daughter under the Moon Prince’s orders was fine, but to think that you were involved…

She has such a beautiful face it’s a waste. Even though her looks won’t bring a nation to ruin, with her pedigree and the bare minimum of education, she could have gone on to become a middle-ranking consort at least.

Zhizi-san’s height is eight sun shorter than girls her age, and while she is steadily putting on weight, it is not yet enough.

Also regarding her speech, it doesn’t seem like she has had much contact with the outside world. No matter how tenderly the young lady was raised, if her mother and wet nurse spoke to her properly, her language faculties could have developed a little more.

Hahaha, seems like the mother treated her daughter as a doll or a pet. It actually irks me. A child uneducated is no different from an animal.

Regarding Hao-sama, I am aware of him. I heard a rumour that he roused the anger of the emperor the other day, but I wonder if that’s true. That person would be quite capable of it.

The empress dowager’s relative he may be, but he’s hopeless. That beautiful and youthful face is wasted on him.

Ah, his three sons got their good-looking faces from their father, but all of them are suited to be married into families as son-in-laws. Their personalities don't resemble their father's. They're good at being aides, and are not the type to want to show off.

That is what I've heard though…

I've heard all of sorts of rumours, but I am keenly aware that I need to look into them properly.

Hao-sama's third son does come to visit quite often. He says he's here to visit his younger sister and he delivers cow's milk each time. Zhizi-san also appears happy for the third son's visit. She looks like a dog wagging its tail.

He seems to adore her, saying that his younger sister is smart, but no matter how I see it, it's favouritism. His eyes are blurry.

If that's how he's going to be, I wanted to tell him that he should have given her proper food and raised her, but it's not beautiful to interfere in a family that has no relation to you. And not like our family is one to talk about others.

When I tried to gently dissuade him from coming too often, Brother started to hand out vegetables he'd grown and got cow's milk in exchange. Moreover, he started to make dairy products that he learnt from the western capital. It is handy in various way to have Brother here, but I want him to stop expanding his field.

Also, Maomao, I have a request for you.

I am working very hard because of this incident that's related to you, so can you listen to a request of mine?

You seem to have some connection to a wheat farmer and I heard that you can purchase wheat at low prices. Can you introduce them to me?

Mm, if you asking why, a ship carrying wheat sank because of a variety of reasons.

If you can write me one letter of introduction, that will settle the matter with Zhizi-san. There will be no debts between us with that.

From Rahan

To Rahan,

No.

Maomao

Maomao immediately wrote him a reply.

Maomao dear,

Are you eating well? I am eating well, so rest assured.

On top of three meals a day, Gu'en-san gives me snacks every time. It's a mystery, though. How does he prepare so many colourful snacks?

I have heard from Liu-san. It seems like Maomao is thinking that because you have never caught smallpox, you won't ever be sent to the site.

Despite Lao-san's appearance, his medical skill is on par with Liu-san. He makes good decisions too. You can leave it to him.

If you were to ever catch smallpox, I will take the responsibility to nurse you back to health. Should that time come, I will probably catch smallpox too, won't I?

Also, it seems like Hao-sama's daughter has come under the Moon Prince's orders, but I will be visiting roughly every half a month.

I was told that I could commute to the inner palace from the residence every day, but now is not the time. I cannot leave Gu'en-san alone. Sorry for that.

From Luomen

The quack doctor's snack procurement channel was certainly a mystery. It may be the inner palace, but you can consider it an enigma how he keeps a steady supply of this many snacks while rarely leaving the inner palace.

However, this wasn't a puzzle for her to solve, so she set it aside.

With regards to the reason why Luomen couldn't easily return, Maomao wondered if it was to keep the consorts in check rather than for their pregnancies.

The consorts could poison one another.

Should anything happen, the quack doctor probably wouldn't be able to deal with it alone.

To Maomao,

Hey, is Kokuyou coming back any time soon?

Is he? Is he?

He'll be back by the new year, right?

When he's not here, I'm beside myself with worry. To tell you how depressed I am, it's to the point where the courtesans of Verdigris Mansion are coming to console me.

You got that? Let me know as soon as you get news of Kokuyou's return.

Also, you have another letter. I've enclosed it.

From Sazen

There was another letter inside. The slightly poor quality paper wasn't scented. The characters were clumsy yet written with care.

To Maomao,

It's gotten cold, hasn't it?

I am doing my best. Somehow, a lot of people want to marry even someone like me.

Everyone reacted when I told them I come from the inner palace. It really is an amazing place.

I also want to visit Verdigris Mansion once, but it's impossible since I will need to save up years of my wages.

See you. Once I get nice paper, I'll write you again.

From Xiaolan

"…Like I said, write down your address. I can't send you a reply otherwise."

Maomao placed the letter into her box of letters.

Chapter 16

Just as Kokuyou wrote in his letter, Yo returned to the capital.

She certainly looks beat.

The sight of Yo, having clearly lost weight in the span of a single month, made Maomao realise it fully. If anything, she felt it was commendable for the girl yet in her mid-teens to have endured a full month of it too.

“I could still work,” Yo said.

Still work—that was true. But if she kept at it…

“You might be able to keep going, but you’ll be burning yourself out,” En’en said. “The human body can recover to some degree, but it has its limits. Rather than overworking yourself without rest to the point of a breakdown, you are planning to return after a short break, right? Then, it is important you recover your energy.”

“B-but.”

“The job you’re doing is something we can’t do.”

She’s saying something sensible!

Maomao was shocked for a moment, but En’en was originally someone with common sense. When it didn’t involve Yao, she did say decent things.

En’en’s obsession with Yao was a bit abnormal, even if she had a debt of gratitude to the other woman. It would be better if she was a little more contained.

“She’s right. Consider that your health comes first.” Changsha also agreed with En’en’s opinion.

“At least, I don’t think Court Physician Liu is ever a hard taskmaster for the court physicians. Same goes for the court ladies. He immediately kicks you out if you’re useless, but seeing as Yo has been given some time off, I can see that you have been useful. You should be proud of that fact,” Yao added.

“Yes, yes. The most important thing for Yo-san right now is energy. Your weight isn’t enough either. And so, let’s eat up today!” Chue said.

“Why is Chue-san here?” Maomao spoke out in doubt.

Maomao and the others were currently at a restaurant near the dorms. They also had a private room set up, so they—being an entirely female group—could eat without strange customers bothering them.

Changsha took Yo’s return as an opportunity to propose a get-together. As luck would have it, everyone was on the early shift, so they all hurried over to the restaurant, but a bonus person came along.

“Myy, don’t mind Chue-san. Everyone knows Chue-san, and it’s quite costly to rent a room, right? It’ll be cheaper if we split it between more people, riiight?” Chue said.

“I get your logic, but isn’t Chue-san the one who eats the most among us?” Maomao asked.

“Huhuhu, huhuhu, isn’t that fine, Maomao-san? This very Chue-san was the one who found the shop that matched everyone’s demands in no time, you know.”

“Well, I guess you’re right.”

It had private rooms, had mild flavours yet was delicious, and was close to the dorms. Maomao had never been to this shop either because of its low-key entrance. She was impressed that such a nice place existed.

Changsha was going around the table, pouring tea. Maomao wanted to drink wine, but they wanted to refrain from drinking in consideration of Yao’s constitution—Yo was still low in energy as well. She had a feeling that Changsha would be good at drinking, but it didn’t seem like the other woman would be up for ordering wine while she was pouring tea. And so, Maomao had no choice but to read the room and conform with everyone else.

“Now, now, everyone. Eat up and enjoooy.” Chue snatched the dishes away from the staff who entered the room. There were bamboo steamers containing dumplings with translucent skin and a soup with fluffy egg. Light, salty flavours. The seasoning had been adjusted to taste, so you could say the dishes were perfect for Yao.

“Yo, I don’t think you’re in the mood for it, but you should eat first to recover your strength. Honestly, you won’t be able to return to the site if you don’t eat anything here and don’t recover. Otherwise, would you prefer to never go back to such a place ever again and stay skinny forever?” Changsha’s tone was quite casual compared to how she spoke with Maomao and the others. It was partly because they were colleagues and she was much closer to Yo than the others.

Yo looked upset at first, but then she gave a big sigh and reached for the bamboo steamer.

“Alrightyyyy, one moment. Chue-san will serve everyone their portions.” Chue was spinning small plates on her fingers. With how overly-dexterous she was, no one would believe that her right hand was disabled. Since her left hand was moving more than twice as usual, she could move her non-paralysed right elbow and above to support her left side.

“You don’t need to do that.” Yao reached out with her own chopsticks. En’en was restless, wanting to serve Yao her portion.

“No, no. It’s not a problem for Yao-san and the others to take as you please, but please don’t forget that your juniors have a tacit understanding to only eat the dishes their seniors have touched. It will be free for all, free of worries, but there is no alcohol here. And so, Chue-san will serve out small portions of everything, and people who want to eat the leftover portion, that’s free for the taking.”

“There are a few things I won’t eat though,” Yao said.

“Please pass those to Chue-san. They’ll be eaten up with no leftovers,” Chue said.

“Wouldn’t the leftover portion be not free for the taking then?”

Among the rich and powerful, there was a custom to let servants eat leftovers.

Anyway, all the dishes brought in have been served, so everyone started to eat.

Since this was a dinner meet that included interaction and information sharing, everyone spoke as they ate.

“Yo-san, sorry about this since we just told you to focus on recovery, but can you give us the news on the locked-down village?” Maomao asked.

It was a topic that would make people lose their appetites, but Yo was open to her question. “Sure. The situation is not good. However, I can say that it is much better compared to what I saw in the past.”

The village where Yo lived in the past only had a few survivors, Yo’s family included.

“What’s the extent of infected people?”

“Around sixty percent of a population of around three hundred people in the village has been fully quarantined. There are deaths, but the speed of the infection is high, likely because people who think themselves completely cured are helping out little by little.”

Yo spoke calmly, but everyone around her had pale faces. Only Chue was shovelling food into her mouth. Maomao also tossed a dumpling into her mouth.

“Could it be the high-ranking court physicians are planning to wait for it to run its course in the village?” Yao asked.

“Yes, but… we’ve already had a few escape attempts, and one person did succeed,” Yo said.

“Is that okay?” Changsha’s face was pale, but she barely managed to reach for the green vegetable stir-fry.

“He was caught soon after. The escapee and the people he was in contact with got quarantined for a time as well, so it looks like it’s fine.”

“That’s a relief.”

Maomao thought so too, but there was one thing that caught her attention. “From what I’m hearing, it’s easy to quarantine in this village, right? To say it differently, it’s relatively far from other villages and towns, so it’s a place that doesn’t have much outside contact, right?”

“Exactly as you say,” Yo said.

“Then, where did the infection come from?” Maomao’s question wasn’t to blame anyone. She just wanted to confirm where the disease came from.

“I don’t know. Actually, it was detected late since they thought it was chickenpox in the beginning as it was only the little kids that caught it long before the adults started getting it too.”

“Did pedlars visit this village?”

“There were a few groups of visitors but none of them appeared to have the poxes. Although, there was a child who accompanied their parent to a nearby town, so people wonder if that was when they got it.”

Maomao couldn’t accept Yo’s answer. “It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“It’s strange, indeed.”

“What’s so strange about it?” Chue asked as she added a generous amount of vinegar into her congee.

“Assume that the child got infected in town. Then, to speak of whether that town has a smallpox epidemic…”

“It does not,” Yo said.

Yao also found it strange like Maomao did, along with everyone else. “Then, where did the smallpox come from?”

It begged the question.

Maomao wasn’t familiar with the kind of outbreak the disease had either. Although she suspected that it came about from a weakened toxin that entered the body. “Did you talk to the child that caught the pox in the beginning?”

“…He seems to have died,” Yo said.

Maomao rested her brow on her left hand. She scooped up the egg from the soup with her free right hand. Perhaps due to its mild flavour, she could barely taste it. “It’s scary if the source of the infection is from the neighbouring town.”

“Yes, if it spreads widely there, our efforts to quarantine the village would be all in vain.”

“Wait. Assuming that there were infected people in that town, and it’s not spreading anymore, so whether they are dead or cured, doesn’t that mean that there is no longer a concern for infection?” Yao’s assessment was reasonable, but there was one thing she left out.

“The bodies of smallpox patients are also infectious, you know,” Maomao said.

“Yes, I’ve been told that it’s better to be careful for around a year. Cremation is advised over burial. Likewise with clothes–they’re dangerous if they have traces of blood or tissue, so you have to sterilise them,” Yo said.

“Is this true?”

It was. Yao wasn’t that knowledgeable in smallpox. Being a court lady that was assistant to court physicians, she had to learn a lot of other things, so her minimal knowledge was reasonable. Let alone Yao, even En’en and Changsha looked like they were learning this for the first time.

“In other words, it means that if the person who infected the child with smallpox had died undiscovered in town, it’ll become a rather terrible matter, right?” Chue said.

“I guess you can also consider it that way.”

If they consider the worst case scenario, that would be it, but everything had an order of precedence. At present, they probably couldn’t hunt for a dead body that may or may not exist.

More importantly, they have to consider other ways to resolve it.

“Did Kokuyou say what he was going to do?” Maomao asked. She recalled the overly-easy-going man.

“Yes, Doctor was thinking of ways to protect against it,” Yo said.

“It sounded like he was looking for cows.”

“Yes. I believe he is studying cowpox.”

Maomao’s eyes widened. “Cowpox?”

“It seems like Doctor is thinking that cowpox can be used as the base to protect against it.”

“W-wait a moment! I don’t think Kokuyou ever mentioned anything like this before. He said his master’s research hadn’t been left behind or something—” Maomao interrupted and drew closer to Yo.

She got so close that Chue stepped in between to stop her. “Eaaasy there.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Maomao asked.

“I believe Doctor isn’t confident about it either. He seems to think that people infected with cowpox would get milder symptoms than human smallpox, so they can be resistant to the disease.”

“Then we should go find cows as soon as possible,” Maomao declared.

“Please wait, Maomao,” En’en said.

“Let’s wait, Maomao-san,” Chue said.

The both of them grabbed onto Maomao’s hand as she was about to fly out.

“There are cases where you can catch smallpox even if you’ve caught cowpox,” Yo said.

“…Then wouldn’t that be pointless?”

“Yes. There are cases where you can prevent smallpox and cases where you don’t.” Yo held up her index fingers. “Doctor’s twin brother caught cowpox, so he could no longer catch human pox. However, his master caught human smallpox even after catching cowpox. He was suffering so much that he got put out of his misery.”

Put out of his misery—in other words, he was killed.

Ahhh, is that how it is?

It was consistent with the story of Kokuyou's past. And it was precisely because of his lack of confidence that he had yet to tell Maomao how to treat it.

If it were up to Maomao, she would probably try out cowpox for the time being. She had no idea if she would get into contact with human smallpox even if she tested it out.

I would've tested it out if dad never brought it up.

Maomao bit her lip. She couldn't test it out since Luomen had imposed a sense of responsibility on her. Let's just say that his ability to anticipate her actions was as expected of him.

"Now then, the mood has gotten a bit weird, but the main star of tonight is heeere." Chue invited in the staff carrying roast duck with a flourish.

The plump duck looked really delicious, but Maomao heard something that bothered her. "Chue-san, this duck couldn't have been brought in by Chue-san, right?"

"Unfortunately not. It would have been better if they allowed it," Chue said.

Maomao was relieved to know that it wasn't Basen's beloved duck at least.

Chapter 17

The day after the court physician assistants' dinner party, Maomao felt a heavy weight on her stomach.

Chue was asleep on Maomao's stomach, and in the corner of her room, Yo was rolled up in the bedding.

"Umm."

They hadn't been drinking, but the vibe was as if they had. Picking a restaurant close to the dorms had been the correct answer, just as Chue had planned. The establishment ran quite late, so when they left the store, it was at a time where they couldn't arrange for carriages either.

Yao and En'en should be sleeping in Changsha's room.

They talked about all sorts of things afterwards.

And speaking of how it turned out…

"Good grief, even though the two of you understand in your minds, aren't you letting your emotions dictate too much?"

It was Changsha who bluntly said what everyone else had been dying to say regarding Yao and En'en up until now.

Normally, Yao would be a little more defiant, but she was currently reflecting on her own actions, so she quietly took it all in. En'en was raring to argue back, but Yao stopped her, so Changsha's incessant chatter continued to gain the upper hand.

Setting aside how she's talking to her seniors…

Changsha was the youngest among them. This little girl continued to spit out sound arguments.

"So I was thinking, but aren't we in this stalemate because you've been treating Yao-san like a child and enabling everything? It may be Maomao-san's home—"

"It's not my home." Maomao denied it as always.

"Maomao-san, drop that for now. You'd have to be finding it odd that they have been freeloading for so long. At any rate, this is the house of a bachelor close to your age. Yes, I know that the estate is large, but it's not like you can stay there for years, right?"

"You are correct. I understand," En'en agreed.

Despite that, Changsha's expression darkened. "But you're somehow spoiling her, En'en-san. That's why Yao-san continues to not make sound judgements even though she actually finds it strange. Yao-san has more common sense than her appearance suggests, so she would had to have stopped because she has En'en-san looking out for her. Yes, you had to have been indirectly indicating to her through actions to leave the place, but you never said it out loud. It's because you never told her it's bad to continue to stay there as she's interested in him. Rahan-sama, was it?"

What should I compare this vibe to? Maomao thought.

It was the vibe of leaving side dishes out in the corner of the kitchen during summer and forgetting it for a few days. How it clumps together in that characteristic way when you lift the lid of the pot.

Yao's lips trembled. Her face reddened.

En'en had a demonic expression.

Chue continued to eat rice. Yo's eyes were shining just a little from the girls' talk.

Maomao requested for a drink refill for the time being.

"Yao-sama! Deserves! A! More! Proper! Man!" En'en said.

"My grandaunt remained unmarried for her entire life because her father said exactly what En'en-san said and didn't allow men to approach his daughter. On her deathbed, the last words she left behind were that if her father was in paradise, let him be dragged down to hell. Are you fine with having Yao-san resent you like that?" Changsha asked.

"Th-that is…"

"Yao-san, I believe you have already realised, but how about changing your approach to get close to Rahan-sama? Yes, yes, I know. You are still unsure whether your feelings towards Rahan-sama are that of love or curiosity. But how about we set that aside for now? At this rate, let alone making him uncomfortable, it'll worsen your impressions. It'll influence you at work too."

"At work too?" Yao reacted to the word 'work.'

Good one, Changsha.

For better or worse, Changsha had been raised in a normal household, so she had finesse in this topic. She could speak of the parts that Maomao would avoid getting into because she had been raised in an environment where she could look at any problem optimistically.

She would be getting into a difficult scene through her association with the court physicians from now on, but right now, her attitude was working for the better.

"Yao-san, how do you want Rahan-sama to see you?" Changsha asked.

"Good question," Yao said.

"Do you want to be fussed over as a beauty?"

"No way. That's a pain."

“A pain, huh?” Chue whispered.

Maomao thought the same. Yao was good-looking and she had a generous figure as well. That is to say, this was the trouble of someone who has it all. A topic that Maomao and Chue had no relation to.

Jinshi would be the one with that prime trouble, isn’t that right?

Maomao took a sip of the tea a staff brought to her.

“Then, do you want him to recognise you as a competent person?”

“Y-yes.” Yao gave an ambiguous affirmation.

En’en eyed Changsha sullenly.

“Then, how about you go home for once?”

“How did you get to that?”

“If you want to be seen as a competent person, don’t you need to have control over your family, not just at work?”

“She’s not wrong,” Chue said as she ate up the last of the stewed pork. “Yao-san’s uncle is still in the western capital, riiight?”

“Yes.”

“Then, now would be the perfect opportunity. It’d be good if you can take control of your family while your uncle is awaaay.”

She said something disturbing…

Chue quickly cleaned up the leftovers. “While your uncle is away, who is managing your family?”

“My mum.”

“Then, is Yao-san’s mother good at this kind of work?”

“I don’t think she’s very good at it.”

“Then, you should just take over for her. Or do you have your hands full with your current job as a court physician assistant, so you can’t do anythiiing?” Chue goaded her.

Maomao had thoughts about this. Yao would only burn herself out by working too hard and cramming too much into her workload. It was exactly the same as Yo who wanted to return to the smallpox infection site.

However, Chue was purposely pushing Yao into doing it.

Maomao kept silent, thinking the other woman must have something up her sleeve.

Yo looked like she wanted to say something, but Maomao quietly stopped her.

“Going home sounds like a good idea. After all, I don’t think you’d be able to live alone properly assuming you do leave Rahan-sama’s place. If that’s the case, it’ll be better for you to be at home while you do the work at home,” Changsha said.

“Please wait, Changsha-san,” En’en said.

“What is it, En’en-san?”

“Did you just say, live alone?”

“I did.”

En’en’s face twisted.

“I mean, if she wants to become a competent person, it’ll be weird to have En’en-san take care of her meals and laundry. If so, she needs to be able to live alone, but I wonder if Yao-san isn’t that skilled with housework. Even if she could wash the bandages, she probably couldn’t iron clothes. If so, it’ll be better for her give up on that and go home.”

“Even if she goes home, someone aside from me will do it. If so, it’s fine for me to do it, right?”

“There’s a big difference. It’s like this, En’en-san and Yao-san, you two do the same work at the same workplace, right? But once you go home, Yao-san does nothing and En’en-san does everything for her. No matter how capable at work Yao-san is, doesn’t that mean En’en-san will overwhelmingly be superior?”

En’en got fatally struck by invisible arrows. Maomao thought that Changsha was truly scary.

“After all, if she can’t win against En’en-san when it comes to housework, then wouldn’t she still be seen as a competent person if she were to go home and take over her family on behalf of her uncle instead?”

“B-but…” En’en looked at Yao pleadingly.

“You’re right. I’ve been spoiled. Housework is still work. I thought I could do everything when I couldn’t.” Yao was very meek.

And Changsha gave the meek Yao even less leeway. “Then, you’ll be going home.”

“Yes. Do I have anything else that is lacking?”

“You do,” Changsha said profoundly.

“Can you tell me in detail?”

“Yes. I will need to hear in detail on what your feelings towards Rahan-sama are.”

Yo’s eyes shone again.

“What you like about him, what about him that interests you? Please tell me without leaving anything out.”

En’en, who was on the verge of death, pleaded for her to stop.

Changsha, scaryyy.

Let’s never be cornered by Changsha. Just Changsha, Maomao thought.

–This was how the rooms were allocated.

Yao and En’en were in Changsha’s room to continue the girls’ talk from hell.

Chapter 18

Yo was put into the same section as Maomao when she returned. The section was relatively busy with a lot of military officers, but it seems Yo, who had experienced a site that was more intense, found it rather quiet. Considering how Court Physician Lao must have anticipated that and had her come back to this section, let’s say it was as expected of the wisdom of his age.

And since Yao, En’en, and Changsha worked in close vicinity, it looks like they would be continuing with the girls’ talk from hell for now. Yao looked tired when she left the dorm but at

the same time she had a bashful expression. As it went on for the entire day, En'en was gaunt as if she lost half her weight.

From the looks of it, they must have spoken favourably of Rahan.

What's so good about him? Maomao thought from the bottom of her heart, while thinking to let it go.

Changsha is clear-cut about her preferences, so it's a good thing they get along relatively well, Maomao thought. Depending on the situation, her personality could produce an irreparable rift.

Truly a relief, Maomao thought deeply. Considering that poison can occasionally become medicine, it looks like Changsha suited as a wonder drug for Yao and En'en.

All things considered, she couldn't help thinking that all of the court physician assistants have strong personalities. Naturally, their gathering wasn't by chance–they had to be whimsical enough to consider becoming an assistant to first take the exam, and the weaker individuals would then be picked off by Yao and the court physicians, so it was obvious that the only ones left were the bold ones.

So, would it be mean to say it was amusing in a sense that En'en had been placed in a tight spot?

"Maomao-san, is it okay to write the log like this?" Yo asked.

"I think it's fine," Maomao said.

As the sections had different bosses, the way things were done differed slightly. Yo, having taken that into account as well, asked Maomao about every little thing. It was a pain, but it was the correct way for the first time.

Then, as there was a young maiden around, the military officers approached with wide grins. Maomao threatened them off by clacking her teeth. It goes without saying that the beefy Court Physician Ri and Wanwan-senpai also spoke to them, so there were no holes in the protection of Yo from strange insects.

Nonetheless, there was a fool who did approach her.

"Hey, hey, how was it at the smallpox site?"

Approaching without reading the room was the one who currently had his pay docked, Tianyu. He slipped past his natural enemy Court Physician Ri's fists and deliberately came over.

"Were the dead autopsied?" he asked.

“The swelling isn’t just on the surface of their skin but on the inside as well?”
“They don’t burst?”

He prioritised his curiosity to talk to Yo, so Maomao surreptitiously called Court Physician Ri over to have him fiercely land a fist on him for her.

“You don’t need to answer him,” Maomao said.

If you were to carelessly dissect a smallpox body, the infection would be scary. Even if one were to have caught smallpox before, there was no asserting that they wouldn’t catch it again.

“Yes.” Yo was strong. She had worked in the inner palace for two years after all. She could probably get on with her work without paying any mind to Tianyu at least. “Actually, we autopsied a lot of them.”

“…Is that so?” Maomao was surprised at the unexpected answer.

“The body of the first child…”

“How did it go?”

Yo shook her head. “There wasn’t anything unusual about it. I am not in the position to pursue it deeply either.”

“Is that so?”

The court physician who carried out the autopsy had probably done it because there was a point of concern. He must have been bothered about how they got infected.

Where did the infection come from?

Maomao continued to work while she was left feeling disturbed.

The disturbing doubt was dispelled surprisingly quickly.

When work ended, Court Physician Liu summoned Maomao. He had summoned her with a mysterious look, so she found herself on guard.

Could I have done something wrong?

It was a summoning timed to when Yo returned home.

“I want to ask you again. Can we trust the man called Kokuyou or not?” Court Physician Liu asked.

“…Court Physician Liu should also be aware that his medical knowledge is impeccable,” Maomao said.

“Yeah, that I know. However, I have some concerns.” Court Physician Liu looked grim. “From what I’ve been told, Yo is close to Kokuyou.”

“Yes.”

In short, it was probably about something that couldn’t be mentioned to Yo he wanted to check with Maomao.

“What did Kokuyou do?” she asked.

“Have you heard about first person infected in the smallpox village?”

“That it was a child and that the source of the infection is still unclear. Yo told me a short while ago that nothing was found in the autopsy.”

From the looks of it, it seems likely that there were facts that had been kept from Yo.

“There is one thing we know from the autopsy. The child had a cut from a bladed weapon. We couldn’t get the details as the child and his family have already died, but according to the villagers, he had been attacked by a random attacker when he went on his trip. From what I’ve been told, there were similar incidents and many children had been attacked. However, the culprit has never be found.”

“A random attacker? By trip, do you mean…”

“Yeah. When he went to another town. And although I said he had been slashed at, his injury was only a light graze on the surface of his skin.”

Maomao understood what Court Physician Liu wanted to say.

“If there is something you noticed, tell me. Because of Luomen’s teachings, you don’t readily offer your thoughts, right? Try voicing to me your trivial speculation now.” Court Physician Liu urged Maomao to speak.

“The goal of the random attacker is to inoculate smallpox pus on children. I don’t know if it was an experiment or a treatment to prevent children from catching smallpox. However, Yo had been purposely infected with smallpox by Kokuyou, and as a result she obtained a constitution

resistant to smallpox. Court Physician Liu, are you suggesting that this smallpox epidemic was caused by Kokuyou?"

"I am not certain, but there is a possibility. Randomly going after children to infect them has finally resulted in one person catching smallpox. It aggravated and infected other people, turning into the current state of affairs. Any inconsistencies?"

It was exactly that. However, even Maomao had reservations about it "Where did the random attacker appear?"

"Can you read a map?"

"Yes."

Court Physician Liu took out a map. He had gone out of his way to double check with her as a lot of people have never seen a map before.

Court Physician Liu ran his index finger from the capital to the north west. "There. It's a three day's walk from here."

Maomao guessed that it was thirty li in terms of distance and checked the name of the town in question that had been drawn on the map. "The man Kokuyou is contracted to come to the pleasure district apothecary a few days a month. He would be in this village here normally. An elderly man lives there. We can confirm with him."

The village Kokuyou stayed at was where Maomao would go to purchase the medicinal herbs she couldn't cultivate herself. It wasn't far from the capital, so it would probably take around three days to walk to the place the random attacker appeared as well.

"You're thinking that Kokuyou can be excluded as a suspect."

"Yes. I believe the possibility is remarkably low."

"Your basis being?"

"Theoretically, it is not impossible, but I cannot see a reason why he would purposely pick a place a three days walk away. If it were an experiment, I can see why he would want to do it at some distant town since he would have some qualms about it, but at the same time, he would have to check its development. While taking a fast horse could shorten the travel time, Kokuyou does not have the money to spare for a fast horse."

Court Physician Liu listened to Maomao quietly.

“Also, if he were treating children so they wouldn’t catch smallpox, he would be fine with doing it somewhere much closer. Above all, he is aware of its dangers, more so than anyone else, so I doubt he would do it in a place he cannot keep his eye on.”

Court Physician Liu rubbed his chin, in thought. “I have a general idea now. Then, how about we change the intent?”

“The intent?”

“What if it wasn’t an experiment, nor was it for treatment, but it was done out of malicious intent?”

“Malicious intent.” The words put Maomao at a loss.

The malice of humans was fearsome. Why? People would bring harm to another despite understanding the loss they would bear. It all boiled down to self-interest.

The malicious intent rooted within the inner palace had once brought about a rebellion. Consequently, a single clan paid the price and was purged.

“Do you know if Kokuyou is malicious or not?” he asked.

“I do not. However, I currently see him as someone who treats people equally.”

Kokuyou may be stingy in his dealings with Maomao, but he wouldn’t make extremely unreasonable demands. Maomao’s assessment was that he wasn’t a relatively bad person considering that many look down on her for her small stature and for being female.

That being said, Maomao couldn’t assert that she was being objective.

Isn’t Court Physician Liu strict on that point because of his past experience travelling in the west with Luomen? Maomao thought.

Predicting everything rationally rather than acting on emotions strangely was what made a superior reliable.

Don’t think subjectively. Get an objective perspective.

And Yo would be more subjective than Maomao. That was probably why Court Physician Liu had avoided Yo and summoned Maomao. Hiding the truth of the autopsy must also be because of this.

“Better I do not talk to Yo about this, right?” she said.

“That needn’t be said,” he replied.

“I was confirming just in case.” Although Maomao was relieved that she didn’t get scolded, she had a feeling like there was something clogged in the back of her mind.

“One more thing.”

“…What is it?”

Could I have actually done something that angered him? Maomao jolted. She was really, really sure that she hadn’t done anything wrong…

Court Physician Liu had an extremely stern look on his face. “I want you to give the Moon Prince regular health checks.”

“…Would it be fine to have me go?”

There were plenty other court physicians that were outstanding. The likes of Maomao wasn’t even one.

“It’s not a medical examination.” Nonetheless, Court Physician Liu looked dissatisfied. Maomao could tell that it wasn’t his will, but some other pressure that had tried to dispatch Maomao.

Although Chue’s face instantly came to mind, the woman didn’t have that much power herself. The one who gave the order was likely a person considerably high-ranking, one of the few people who numbered less than the five fingers on her hand–all Chue could do was be their mouthpiece.

“Certainly.” Maomao bowed her head at Court Physician Liu.

Chapter 19

By some stroke of luck, Maomao was at Jinshi’s palace.

“Yes, yes, you must not have had dinner yet. I have it prepared.” Suiren started to lay out the meal like she was very much her grandmother.

There was a generous spread of dishes Maomao wanted to eat immediately, but she had to mind her manners. Not only was she not the head of the house, she was in the presence of an imperial. There was no way she could casually dig in.

Although she often ate first as the food taster, from what she could tell from the table setting, she was being told to join him in his meal.

Jinshi slurped a mouthful of congee. "…You can eat."

I've been waiting!

Having received Jinshi's approval, Maomao helped herself to some congee. The broth was rich with a chicken flavour and there were floating bits of rice and meat.

Jinshi studied Maomao as he took a sip of the aperitif. "How has work been lately?" he asked.

Maomao swallowed the food in her mouth. "No changes for me."

"Nor for I."

Nor for I, huh?

As for Maomao, she meant that there were changes for Yao, En'en, and Yo, but there was no need for her to go out of her way to correct it. He would probably tell her that he didn't ask about her personally.

Jinshi looked like he wanted to say something but didn't know how to bring it up.

You don't have to force yourself to speak.

Maomao ate in silence as she recalled that she was officially here to give the imperial brother a health check. She chewed and gulped down a juicy soup dumpling, then set down her chopsticks. "Jinshi-sama, you look well."

He would usually look exhausted from overwork, but it didn't seem to be the case today.

"Yeah, I did acquire a subordinate whom Maomao hates to decrease my workload," he replied.

"Hahaha, if you mean the man with Hu in his name, how about we stage an accident and dispose of him for the sake of the future?" Maomao hated Hulang.

"Stop, stop. As it is, Chue would try to take his life if she has the opportunity to do so."

Go, Chue.

Maomao picked up her chopsticks and went for the pickled vegetables.

“Besides, that one is useful for all sorts of intelligence,” Jinshi added.

“Is that sooo? What a pity.” She crunched on some pickles.

“You also look well, Maomao.”

“The most stomachache-inducing work is over.”

“Is that so? Has there been anything out of the ordinary?”

“Come to think of it, I did get a letter from an inner palace friend.”

“…Your friend…that would be, the girl who attended the learning centre?”

“Yes, you remember her.”

Was Xiaolan finding what she learnt at the learning centre helpful in her current day-to-day life?

“So she learnt her words well enough that she could send a letter.”

“Yes. However, I can never send her a reply because she forgets to put in her address.”

Jinshi rubbed his chin. “Shall I look into it then?”

“No, please leave it.” Maomao drank some tea.

“Why is that?”

“I will send her a reply. I will have to write, ‘Don’t contact the pleasure district. It’ll give rise to strange rumours,’ and end it there.”

Normally people don’t send letters to a brothel.

“Wouldn’t it be fine if you prepare a different addressee?”

“Wouldn’t that give Chue-san more work?”

It was enough that Xiaolan was happy. Getting her involved with Maomao would probably get her monitored. Her letters would be inspected and her replies to Maomao would become bland. For Xiaolan to live in peace, the correct answer was for Maomao to not get into contact with her.

Maomao had too many things she couldn't speak about, like the emperor's surgery and smallpox.

However, at the same time, she felt like she was doing Xiaolan a disservice.

Maomao didn't want to send a reply because she wanted to know about Xiaolan's ordinary days. Until the day Xiaolan gives up on writing letters to her.

"…Has Jinshi-sama heard anything about smallpox?" Even with Jinshi, Maomao had to be careful with her words.

"Hulang is looking into smallpox currently. You don't know the infection source of smallpox, is that right?"

"Yes."

The court physicians have a tacit understanding that their conversations would contain things they couldn't readily talk about. Jinshi, taking that into account as well, said the words infection source. "I heard a man called Kokuyou is under suspicion. They say that he had spread smallpox by purposely infecting children with it," he said.

"So you know this much."

"Is that guy the culprit?"

Maomao shook her head. "Although it is within his capabilities, he has no reason to do so."

"Then who could the culprit be?"

"May I offer my speculation?"

"It's not speculation, but a deduction." Jinshi's face was like their inner palace days when he wanted to order her to solve the mystery.

Maomao crossed her arms. How rude, she thought. "They are going after children to inoculate them with smallpox. Their actions look the same as Kokuyou's, but there is a point of difference."

"What is this difference?"

"Kokuyou does it when the children are healthy so the disease doesn't aggravate. However, the culprit attacks unknown children. Also, being a random attacker, they would not be able to watch its development." Maomao spoke like she was sorting out her mind. "…It feels like a half-baked imitation."

“What do you mean by imitation?”

“Imitating a doctor, perhaps? It feels like a child’s game of make-believe where they only copy what they see and do not understand what they are doing.”

“A game of make-believe, huh? Then you mean, someone is doing the treatment to prevent smallpox, but they failed since they only learnt by imitation… “

“That is what I think, but I do not think there is such a person who knows about that smallpox treatment. Besides, it seems like most of the residents of the village that Kokuyou treated have died… Hm?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Come to think of it, I think I was told something like there was one adult survivor from that village.” Maomao slapped her brow. She had a feeling Yo told her this, but the memory was vague. “You might know if you ask the court lady by the name of Yo.”

Maomao had a feeling Yo said something. She crunched on more pickles. It was perfectly salted, a flavour that made her want to eat it all.

“However, what kind of person is this Kokuyou you talked about earlier?” Jinshi asked.

Oh?

Jinshi has never met him, huh? Maomao thought. She would meet all sorts of people day in and day out, so she nearly forgot who knew who. “He’s a man with half of his face covered in smallpox scars. He’s overly cheerful, but his medical knowledge is solid. Also, he’s quite stingy.”

“Medical knowledge, huh? It looks to me he’s not a court physician.”

“Correct. He’s a stray doctor. He’s moved around a lot, perhaps due to his misfortunate nature. Come to think of it, he’s asked a lot about horses and cows lately.”

“Horses and cows? Is this related to the medical treatment?”

“I think it might be.” Maomao was also curious. “I am also curious, so when Kokuyou proposes something, may I come along as well?”

“I’ll let them know.”

“Thank you very much.” Maomao bowed her head.

Maomao and Jinshi had a bad habit of turning their conversations into work.

However, it couldn't be helped since they barely have any interests and hobbies in common.

Only that Jinshi enjoyed food from food stalls. It seems his tastes turn towards commoner fare.

Maomao reached for the noodles. This too, was delicious, rich in flavour. "Come to think of it, Chue-san told me there is a good knife-cut noodles stand."

"Knife-cut noodles, stand."

It was something that Jinshi could never have. The imperial brother had no way of eating leisurely at a food stand in town. He would have to borrow clothes off a manservant and erase his body scent.

However, for a jaunt around town like they did before, the scar on his right cheek was too conspicuous, and concealing it as a burn scar would also stand out too much.

Although everyone in the inner palace knew the eunuch Jinshi's face, no one knew him in town back then.

Now that he was known in the capital as the imperial brother, there was no way he could casually dress up for a stroll around town.

"Shall I ask if I can get takeaway?" she asked.

"The noodles will get soggy and cold. Most importantly, it tastes better when you slurp the hot noodles when you're out in the cold."

"You know very well how to eat it." Maomao glanced at Suiren. There was no doubt this capable nanny practiced hard in knife-cutting noodles despite her old age. "Please summon for me when Suiren-sama cooks knife-cut noodles."

"Got it, or rather, I'll summon you over for other things too."

"Yes."

As Maomao ate the last of the pickles, she thought, I have to write a report.

On that, "The imperial brother is in good health."

Chapter 20

A few days later, an unusual patient showed up at the medical office.

A pale-faced man with a bandaged right arm was brought in. Not only that, the one who brought him in was a familiar face.

Maomao squinted at the chaperone.

“Um, I’m Ujun…”

“Oh, long time no see!” Maomao said, loudly to hide that she had nearly forgotten him.

Ujun was former Consort Lishu’s half-brother.

“What’s the matter?” she asked Ujun as the patient looked like he was suffering quite a bit.

The other court physicians were eating lunch, so Maomao and Yo had stayed behind to watch the office. They would normally have one court physician with them, but it couldn’t be helped. Wanwan-senpai was out shopping while Court Physician Lao had yet to return.

“He’s been feeling unwell since a couple of days ago. Just as his fever came down, he got these symptoms,” Ujun said. It seems the patient was light-headed and couldn’t make his way here on his own.

“What is this injury?”

“I was told he got this around ten days ago. A thug had retaliated during an attempt to arrest them.”

“A thug.” She undid the bandage, thinking that his fever might have been from an infection.

And she turned pale right that instant.

“YO!” she called out to the court lady junior, forgetting honorifics.

Yo saw the exposed skin and her face paled too. “Maomao-san, I’ll take over!”

“Okay.” Leaving the patient to Yo, Maomao frantically went to wash her hands, then covered her mouth with a towel. Then she dragged the military officer who brought the patient over by his hand. “Please wash your hands. Then change your clothes. Then—”

Maomao rattled off every measure she could think of. Ujun was a timid man, unlike a military officer, but because of that, he was perceptive and meek. He diligently followed Maomao's instructions.

Once she was done giving directions to Ujun, she headed to the room next door.

"We're closed for today. Please go back!" she ripped off the sheets and the two unwell military officers lying on the bed tumbled out.

"What was that for?!"

She knew what he meant, but they were in a state of emergency. "Do you want to catch a disease?!" Maomao also yelled—but she was probably rational since she didn't use an authoritative tone at least.

The military officers left the room when they noticed Maomao's unusual state.

"Maomao-san, I'll lay him on the bed."

"Yeah, sorry and thank you." She felt bad for leaving it all to Yo, but she wanted to avoid touching the patient as much as possible.

The reason being…

"To think that it's smallpox."

When she took off the bandage from the patient's right arm, she saw red rashes.

Although still early at this point in time to declare it smallpox, there was one thing Maomao was certain about.

"He's been feeling unwell since a couple of days ago. Just when his fever came down, he got these symptoms."

It matched the early symptoms of smallpox.

"I was told he got this around ten days ago. A thug had retaliated during an attempt to arrest them."

An injury from a thug.

Maomao had heard about the random attacker. If the random attacker who spread the source of smallpox was the same person as the thug who attacked the patient, it goes without saying what the disease had to be.

Maomao wrote a note stating, “Possible smallpox patient. Do not enter,” and stuck it on the entrance of the medical office. She also locked the door from the inside for good measure.

“I’ve laid him down.” Yo was back.

“Yo, change into this.”

“Yes.” Yo threw off her top and put on the article of clothing Maomao handed her. It was an apron used by court physicians. Although Yo herself wouldn’t get infected, it was important for her to not infect others by walking past them.

“I have changed my clothes just the way you told me. Can you please give me an explanation as to what is going on?” Ujun, the one who brought in the patient, looked bewildered. He also had a cloth covering his mouth.

This was a situation where being kind had backfired on him.

In a sense, the fact that it was this man saved us the trouble.

Maomao and Yo wouldn’t have stood chance if it were a hotblooded person.

“There is a high chance that the patient has the pox. You might also get infected since you were the one who brought him here.”

“…” Ujun looked more thoughtful than panicked. “By the pox, do you mean that smallpox?”

“It’s the one that’s not chickenpox.”

Ujun looked drained. Since he normally didn’t have much drive, you could say that there was no change. “This is very troubling, but it can’t be helped in this case. What should I do after this?”

“It will depend on whether the patient has smallpox or not. We’ll quarantine ourselves for the time being. It’ll be between ten days to half a month. Also, have you caught smallpox before?”

“I’ve caught chickenpox before.”

Maomao couldn’t see anything resembling pockmarks on Ujun’s skin. “How much do you know about smallpox?”

“That it is an extremely infectious disease with a high fatality rate. I’ve also heard that you’d easily get scarring from blisters on your skin.”

The knowledge was satisfactory for a layman.

It was truly a relief that it was Ujun who brought the patient over.

“Are there any military officers who had been in close contact with him? Any who sleep with him in the same room? And if I could also get some idea of his family structure…”

“Um.” Ujun crossed his arms. “I believe he lives alone. He’s not really the type that does well with living with others, so I think he lives in a rented house nearby instead of the dorms. As for meals, he doesn’t go to restaurants but brings back takeaway from food stands.”

“You’re well-informed.”

“Yes. Surprisingly, he craves company, so he speaks a lot to someone like me.” Ujun was a delicate man, but conversely he lowered people’s guard. He might be a subspecies of the quack doctor from the inner palace.

Maomao listened to Ujun as she noted it down on a piece of paper.

In the meantime, Yo handled the smallpox with a practised hand.

While she was talking to Ujun about various things, there was a knock on the door from outside.

“What on earth happened?!”

The voice belonged to Court Physician Ri.

“Exactly what I wrote on the notice. I have more information.” Maomao slid her notes under the door. “We have yet to determine if the sleeping patient has smallpox for sure, but could I have gone too far with my decision?”

“No, it’s fine. Court Physician Lao would probably have done the same.”

If this was just Maomao getting ahead of herself, it was fine.

“However, we can’t have you occupy the medical office for days, so we’ll arrange for another room and have you move over right after.”

“Understood. For the time being, we are hungry, so can you provide us one patient diet and three portions each of appetisers that sound good on top of prawn fried rice, sweet-salty steamed spare ribs and lotus leaf wrapped chicken?”

“…Does it have to be that menu?”

There was scepticism mixed in Court Physician Ri’s tone.

“Yes, we might be with the originator of the disease. So we’ll need proper nutrition to not lose to it,” Maomao said in a tough voice so that the person on the other side of the door could hear it. “We also want some fruits.”

“And some persimmons too, please.” Yo added to the order.

“It’ll be great if we can get books,” Ujun also said, shrewdly. “Around ten popular books.”

“…Got it.”

Following Court Physician Ri’s astounded voice, there was the sound of footsteps leaving the medical office..

Chapter 21

Not long after, Maomao and the others moved to another room. Should they continue to occupy the medical office, they would have gotten in the way of work.

When they were shown to the dosage experimentation site she had grown to know and love, she fell into an indescribable mood.

“So there’s a place like this.” Ujun was surprised to see a clinic in town.

With the dosage experiments scaled down when the emperor’s surgery ended without incident, there were a lot of empty rooms.

The patient was carried over in a cage. Maomao and the others walked over with their mouths covered.

“I don’t think Maomao-san is infected,” Yo said.

Maomao thought so too, but she had that niggling feeling from touching the rashes when she undid the bandages. She washed her hands right after, so the chance of infection was low. Maomao decided to turn to the higher ups to make the judgement call.

“Be sure to stay put for a while.”

If that was what Court Physician Liu told her, there was nothing else she could do.

“Are there enough workers?” Maomao wondered, but she could only abide by the words of her superior.

I’m also worried about Yo.

However, Yo worked briskly and she was well-versed with the patient. She might struggle with a couple of patients, but with only one, she managed just fine on her own.

They would each be staying in a room by themselves at the clinic. As for their meals, they would pick them up from the dining hall. They would also be sharing the toilet, but other than that, they wouldn’t be leaving their rooms.

Yo’s room was next to Maomao’s. The patient was quarantined in a room a short distance away.

Maomao was lying sprawled out while reading the books she had accumulated. Thanks to Ujun requesting books, Maomao also requested for more.

The most important thing was the book that was currently in her hands.

I have Kada’s book!

She was given one of the copies of the tattered book that had been restored. Normally, being a banned book, it was forbidden to be taken out, but she got special permission.

They even copied Kokuyou’s research materials. She had enjoyed comparing the two texts so much she lost track of time.

Kada’s book was moth-eaten in places, so Maomao needed to supplement it with her own knowledge and Kokuyou’s materials. It was a fun activity that used her brain. Although, it was unfortunate that she couldn’t gather her thoughts by taking notes, since banned books weren’t allowed to be copied.

To avoid contracting smallpox, one must catch a weaker form of smallpox beforehand.

There is still a chance of aggravation from the weaker form of the toxin.

Maomao had a lot of knowledge as well. She reviewed her knowledge as she read the book.

There is also a chance of gaining resistance from contracting a very similar disease.

“A very similar disease.”

Maomao heard the sound of footsteps. She could tell it was Yo who was returning to her room next door.

“Maomao-san, how are you?”

Yo asked about her condition from the other side of the door.

“I think I’m fine, but I’m not allowed to leave, yeah?”

“It goes without saying.”

Maomao understood as well. “How is the patient?”

“He has a rash, but it didn’t spread much. He also has a fever, but it’s receding surprisingly quickly.”

She could tell that Yo was making a mystified expression.

“What if it’s not smallpox?”

“No, the symptoms resemble smallpox, and since he’s a military officer, it would mean that he is physically fit. He might have caught a weaker variant by chance.”

Maomao groaned, in agreement as well.

“Leaving that aside, there’s something that’s been bothering me. Can I ask you?”

“What is it?”

“Why did Maomao-san respond to that cut? I wouldn’t have been convinced that it was smallpox based on that.”

Right, Maomao thought.

Yo wasn't yet informed about the random attacker case. There was a random attacker who was spreading the seeds of smallpox, and Kokuyou was under suspicion. Court Physician Liu probably didn't speak to Yo about this to avoid getting her personal feelings involved in the matter about Kokuyou.

Maomao opened her mouth while wondering what she should do. Yo would probably trust Kokuyou. Maomao also wanted to believe in him.

"Actually…"

She talked about the random attacker.

"Doctor wouldn't do such a thing!"

As expected, Yo rejected the notion. Judging by her raised voice, Maomao could tell that the girl's emotions were stirred up.

"Of course I know that. It's just that I can't think of anyone else who would use this method to inoculate the seeds of smallpox. Supposing that there isn't anyone else who saw that method personally. Yo-san mentioned it before, right? How there was another survivor from your village aside from your family and a couple of children."

"Ah, that…" Yo hesitated. "Yes. There is one person. The witch doctor, who was the village head at the time."

"The witch doctor." If Maomao remembered correctly, it was the person who drove Kokuyou out. She didn't think it would be that person, of all people.

"But I don't think the village head would copy Doctor. He was so against what Doctor did, after all."

Yo was bewildered, but Maomao felt like she understood their feelings on the contrary.

"In truth, he might have tried it out once he knew what Kokuyou did was correct."

He should've just dropped dead.

Maomao didn't voice her thoughts. She only considered how he survived. "Was the village head wealthier than the other villagers?"

"...Most probably. He did purchase food in bulk as our representative."

With good nutrition, the chance of survival increased. She also had another consideration in mind.

“Could he have caught smallpox before?”

“I… don’t know about that. Although, he said that it’s because he’s a witch doctor, so he always wore clothes that covered his skin. Ah, but also—”

“Also?”

“He said that he will never catch diseases, because those are a result of a curse.”

Maomao took it as that this village head wasn’t a witch doctor but a swindler.

The people at a village settlement would be either impoverished or those who could no longer return to their former places. The village head must be the latter.

“Suppose the village head is the random attacker, what do we do?”

“I’ll never forgive him! I can’t believe he would not only chase out Doctor and also cause trouble to others!”

“We can’t decide that the village head is the culprit, but just in case, it might be good if you can tell us what he looks like and we can draw up a portrait.”

“Yes.”

“This is only just in case.”

“I know.”

Maomao emphasised her words so that Yo didn’t charge ahead. The girl had an emotional side. It would be scary if Maomao didn’t underscore her point.

“Now’s not the time. I will prioritise watching the patient’s condition,” Yo said, as if she had given up.

The patient’s condition was mild. His fever broke in a few days and he asked when he could return to work.

“Absolutely not!”

Yo was audibly yelling, probably because the patient tried to leave the clinic.

Smallpox was the same as colds in how a person recently recovered was still contagious. More than anything, it was said that scabs were contagious for a year even. There was no way they could simply let him out in public.

“Sounds like she’s having a tough time,” Ujun said from a short distance away. It seemed he was here to pick up his meal just like Maomao.

“Looks like Ujun-san didn’t get any particular symptoms either,” Maomao said.

“Please call me Jun.” Ujun gave her a carefree smile.

Although this man was from the U clan, he was pretty much expelled from the clan. The reason he called himself Ujun the other day was probably so it would be easier to remind Maomao whom he thought had forgotten him.

Even though he asked her to call him casually, she ignored him. She had folded back when Rikuson told her to address him without honorifics, but she figured that Ujun would be the one folding if she continued to ignore him.

Maomao thought that just because they were speaking more casually to each other, it didn’t necessarily mean that they were a lot closer.

“Looks like it’s about time for us to go outside too,” Ujun said.

With the patient, the source of the infection, this energetic, it would seem like Maomao and the others would be fine as well.

“I guess so.” Maomao looked at Ujun’s demeanour and thought, I knew it. “More importantly, what is your intention with this charade?”

“Charade?”

Maomao picked up her meal from the table and rudely ate with her hands. “The military officer was injured by the random attacker while on duty, right?”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve heard.”

“The cut was on his forearm, right?”

“Yes.”

I knew it, Maomao sighed. “I believe a military officer who is on patrol around town would be wearing arm guards. Wouldn’t that be a difficult place for a random attacker to slash at?”

Ujun smiled ambiguously at her question.

He reminds me of someone.

Chue came to mind.

Maomao had been deceived by Chue in the western capital. If not for that experience, she wouldn't have hit upon this idea now. "Was it a trick to have me quarantined?"

"I don't know what you are talking about." Ujun pretended to know nothing.

If this was just a mistake in Maomao's speculation, that was fine. The man called Ujun would forget Maomao's nonsense. However, it was a different matter if her speculation was correct.

Maomao changed the topic. "Do you know where Lishu-sama, your younger sister, is right now, Ujun-san?"

"I hear she has retired to religion."

"She is at a place called Red Plum Mansion that gathers eccentric people. Lishu-sama is raising ducks there."

"Ducks?"

"They also raise horses and cows." Maomao recalled that Kokuyou was looking for horses and cows.

She also requested to be brought to that place. However, would the court physicians already know of Kokuyou's project by now?

Kada's book, Kokuyou's research materials, and horses and cows.

To be resistant to smallpox, one must contract a weaker form of the disease.

One may also acquire resistance from catching a related disease.

And humans may catch diseases from livestock as well.

"A disease that is like smallpox for horses and cows. People would contract the same disease if you inoculate them with it. Ujun-san, is it not the case that the patient you brought in had been inoculated with the seed of that disease?"

She didn't think Ujun came here by chance.

“Please call me Jun.” Ujun was all smiles.

“Are you playing dumb?”

“I’m just saying what I’m saying. The one with U in his name is a suspicious insignificant person, so he cannot turn down what has been requested of him.” He confessed that he had done as he was told.

Maomao let out a heavy sigh. Ujun may be an insignificant person, but it looked like he knew how to live as one.

“However, I am curious about how Lishu-sama is faring. I was just told that if I wanted to know, I should bring this patient to the medical office.”

Although Maomao didn’t know how much of what he was saying was true, it didn’t seem like he would give her details on what she wanted to know.

“Then, I have a question. How many more days do I have to stay here?”

“Beats me. Everyone said that you need to be quarantined for around ten days. So, would that make it ten days?” Ujun answered while acting as though he knew nothing.

Chapter 22

They were finally released, ten days after their life in quarantine began.

Ujun continued to feign ignorance until the end, and Yo continued to take care of the patient during that time. Maomao said nothing about this being a setup to Yo. Telling her would have been unfair and above all, she had no idea how that emotional girl would react.

Despite the uneasiness about who was behind it and why they did it plaguing her throughout, the opportunity for her to get answers finally presented itself.

The characteristic sound of footfalls approached her, as if it were timed to the moment Yo left to inform their superiors of the patient’s record.

“I am here to pick you uuuuup.”

Maomao only knew of one person who would drag out the end of her sentences like this. “Chue-san, can you tell me what is going on?”

Maomao had no idea when the military officer patient and Ujun left. She was the only one left in the clinic.

“Can’t be heeeelped.” Chue let herself into the clinic and started to prepare tea with great familiarity. As far as Maomao knew, Chue had never been here before, but since it was Chue, she accepted it.

Maomao wiped down the table and received the tea from Chue. They had no snacks, so Chue took out steamed buns from her bosom pocket.

“Tadah! They’ve been waaarmed.”

“…” The warmth was subtle. Maomao purposely set it down beside the tea for it to cool. There might be a reason behind Chue acting somewhat theatrically, but since Maomao didn’t understand it, she ignored it.

“There were various complicated causes, and it was unavoidable. As for Jun-san, he asked to help to support his half-sister.”

“Uh huh.” Maomao had no idea how much of what Chue said was true, but she let it go for now.

“First off, what do you know about smallpox?”

If her conjecture were true, then something similar to the appendicitis dosage experiment was being done with smallpox as well. “It looks more and more to me like some experimentation took place that I am not aware of.”

Maomao was probably lent the banned book to have her understand what was going on. It was ultimately a copied version, not even a full copy to boot. “The words ‘smallpox vaccination’ appeared in the banned book. I was only handed a copy of that section, so it was easy to understand.”

Being a banned book, there was no autopsy section. They probably thought it would be bad to take that section outside. With it missing, they could be excused even if anyone were to see it.

“The letter from Kokuyou had mentioned cows and horses. So it looks like the court physicians already made a move in that experiment, right?” Maomao said.

“Yes, they used the cows and horses from Red Plum Mansion where my brother-in-law’s sweetheart is staying. And Maomao-san, you have long realised this, right? The patient here was indeed one of the people who trialled that smallpox vaccinatiooon,” Chue replied.

It was as Maomao imagined. “Was that person used to have me quarantined?”

Chue let out an infuriating guffaw. “Haha, this time you’re the bonus, Maomao-saaan.”

“Hm, then you mean, it wasn’t me…”

…but Yo who was the main person to be quarantined?

What is the meaning of this?

Chue must have laughed to let Maomao know that she had been too self-conscious. If anything, Chue liked to provoke people, so Maomao decided to reply nonchalantly. She knew that getting angry would only have the opposite effect. “So this was to prevent Yo from going anywhere?”

Chue winked and snapped her left fingers with a smile.

Chue has a natural talent for provoking people, Maomao thought.

“Why Yo? If it’s her relation to Kokuyou…” Maomao suddenly paused. People who were privy to Kokuyou’s smallpox vaccination method. She thought about the surviving villagers. And then, Yo’s family and that one other person. “…Did someone in Yo-san’s family perform smallpox vaccinations of their own accord?”

“It makes things so easy, when there’s no need to explain to Maomao-saaan,” Chue said.

Maomao broke out entirely in sweat. Sweat from tension was different than sweat from exercise. Chue would probably have noticed by the smell.

“It was thought that Yo-san was complicit, but seeing how she has been these past ten days, she seems to be unrelaaated.” As if to reassure Maomao, Chue first emphasised that Yo was innocent. “And regarding the smallpox vaccination, you’d understand if I just tell you that Yo-san’s family attempted it?”

“Attempted?”

It seems like Chue was trying to get Maomao to work it out. Maomao found it roundabout, but since she often replied like this, she couldn’t talk back.

Yo is unrelated.

Yo’s family attempted the smallpox vaccination.

They would need tissue from smallpox patients to do the vaccination.

Yo's village had been devastated by smallpox years ago. Even if tissue from patients have been saved back then, they wouldn't be viable for vaccinations now.

Then, it would mean that they needed parts from relatively fresh smallpox patient.

"Was Yo-san's family encouraged by someone to do the vaccination and received parts from smallpox patients?" Maomao asked.

Chue made a circle with her fingers. "Correeect. It seems that certain someone would come during the day when Yo-san isn't around. Yo-san's mother is away, so only the children are at home. It seems like it has been kept a secret from Yo-san who returned from the front lines of the smallpox site."

"And who is this person?"

"Yes, it is the person Maomao is thinking of. It is the village head from Yo-san's village. While the adults are away, the children are the only ones left at home. He must have heard from somewhere that the survivors of the village are residing in the capital. Being the former village head, the children must have let their guard down. That seems to be why they tried to copy the smallpox vaccination. Their mother noticed the abnormality, put a stop to it, and an incident broke out," Chue said as she ate a steamed bun. Was the fact that she could eat while speaking without making a mess, a mark of a bride of a good family, even as degenerate as she was?

"It is better to not let Yo-san know about this. More importantly, does it mean that this large-scale staged act was started, based on the fact that the village head had yet to be arrested?" Maomao asked.

Chue nodded. "It seems the man of Yo-san's family is helping out in the smallpox outbreak region. It would have been troubling if Yo-san were to know of it and it became a huge incident. In order to capture the village head when he returned, officers had been secretly stationed around her family home. The reason for this staged act was that so she could be quarantined in a way that wouldn't arouse her suspicions."

"Their attempt may have failed, but the fact that they were going to perform the smallpox vaccination of their own accord is a problem."

Children they may be, but they should expect a certain level of punishment. There was a possibility that Yo would run in a strange direction.

Yo was quite good for her age as a health worker, but she was too emotional.

Although not as catastrophic as Tianyu, there was a part that was difficult to manage.

“That’s right—it’s troubling, riiight? Yo-san still doesn’t know. And so, there was no way Yo-san could go home and if possible, we had to cut off all information as well. All so that she doesn’t find out there is surveillance around her home to try catch the village head.”

Maomao understood what Chue was getting at, but she had her doubts too. “Then why did you involve me too?”

“Haha, Yo-san would be reassured to have another woman with her, and—”

“And?”

“There is one more thing. In a time like this, we would want to have Rakan-sama’s assistance.”

Maomao made an expression of disgust as always.

“We even added the pretext that it was to protect Maomao-san from running into the village heaad.” Chue clapped her hands and brought out flags and flowers. Her silly act was quite strange.

“Looks like the village head had visited various health care workers. Protecting Yo-san was also related to that.”

There was the pretext of ten day, but should she take it as the problem has already been resolved now that they have been released? “Then, the village head has been caught?”

“Yes… three days ago.”

Maomao didn’t overlook that evasive phrasing. “Was he not captured alive?”

“Not that.”

“Then…”

“The village head, the one called the random attacker, was found in the village that has been locked down due to smallpox. It seems the children spilled that Yo-san’s father is working theeere.” Chue clapped her hands. “And at the same time, Kokuyou-san was discovered stabbed by the random attacker.”

“WHAT?!” Maomao jumped to her feet and smacked the table.

“He’s alive. It was a little dangerous, but he made iiiit.”

“…The weirdo tactician was useless, huh?”

“The request for Rakan-sama’s assistance only extended to within the capital. He’s not someone who would pay attention to another town Maomao-san is not in, after all.”

A strange sense of guilt rose in Maomao. “So, what does Chue-san want me to do by explaining all this to me?”

Chue had long finished her steamed bun so she was looking at Maomao’s. The bun was cold, but Maomao directly handed it over.

Chue took the steamed bun and fiddled with it as she spoke, “The village head has been captured. He’s not in a good condition. He’s acting like he’s been apprehended by something and is on his last legs. Everyone is neglecting him, saying that it’s a madman’s nonsense, but are you curious?”

“Are you telling me to give that person a check-up?”

“I’m not forcing youuu.”

It was unfair to say it like this.

Maomao could only move in the direction her scale of troublesomeness and curiosity tipped towards.

Chapter 23

Maomao was a creature whose curiosity would win over troublesomeness. Thus, she was walking on cold stone, heading down a narrow, dark, and damp underground path.

She was in the prison. A place for those who had committed crimes that no one would wish to improve.

The sound of footsteps echoed.

“Don’t make eye contact with the criminals,” Rihaku cautioned her.

Given the location, he made the better choice of guide than Chue. Chue may be tough and stronger than any common guard, but she looked like a sloppy attendant with her one disabled arm. It was correct to pick guards that were big and brawny to not be slighted by rough people. The other two guards were also chosen for their large build.

“…”

“…”

The voices of the criminals sounded like curses. The things being said when they saw Maomao’s group passing through were nothing good. Even if they were showering contemptuous and obscene words, the criminals had no way of leaving their cells. They didn’t sound well either.

The sounds of coughing. Their glazed eyes had no signs of vitality.

Maomao understood this was a prison for the ill.

Maomao covered her mouth with a towel. Rihaku and the others did the same. It didn’t give her a pleasant feeling to abandon the sick, but she mustn’t show compassion here—Maomao ignored the voices around her.

“It’s this one.”

It was one of the narrow solitary cells. A man was lying on a worn-out mat. He had a torn piece of cloth draped over him in place of a blanket.

There was an air vent to allow ventilation. Shivering from the draught, the prisoner could only curl up into a ball.

A man who could shiver in the cold. That was the head of Yo’s village and the witch doctor.

One of the guards made a disgusted face as he opened the cell and roused the prisoner inside.

He smells of death.

Living creatures give off a characteristic smell when they die. A trace of that smell was already coming from the prisoner’s body.

Rihaku aimed the light over.

Sunken eye sockets and leathery skin. Fingers that looked black and necrotic.

“…–”

The prisoner couldn’t articulate. His body was fully paralysed. Pockmarks were visible on his head.

“Why did you attempt to spread the smallpox vaccination, the seeds of smallpox, around?” Maomao asked.

“—a, haha.” The prisoner started to laugh. It was a strained laugh, like he was squeezing out the last of his energy for it. “Hahaha, why am I the ‘ad ‘erson?”

The prisoner’s voice was muffled.

“I wan’ed to copy that guy, ‘o’u’you.”

It seems like he was talking about Kokuyou.

“That guy, he’s a houkou, you know.”

“Houkou.” For some reason, that was the only word she could pick out clearly.

“Hahahaa, haa…” The prisoner laughed, then his thread snapped.

The guard rushed over to lift up the prisoner.

“Is he alive?”

“Barely,” the guard replied.

“…”

Would the prisoner die here without giving a proper testimony? The prisoner’s crimes were too heavy for him to expire on top of a warm mattress.

Maomao studied the hand of the prisoner who was laid on the mat.

Houkou.

Houkou for public duty, houkou for direction, houkou for howl, houkou for perfume…

Houkou for penghou.

The name of a mythical creature came to mind.

The thousand-year tree spirit. Although the legend differed depending on the region, the one that Maomao knew was a creature close to a tree spirit. When you face the mountains and call out, it would echo back at you.

She understood what was meant by calling Kokuyou the tree spirit.

Kokuyou always interacted with Maomao with a foolish smile. He would foolishly talk about his misfortunate life story, looking like he wasn't affected by it.

A tree spirit, huh?

Maomao clenched her fists.

"What's wrong, Lass?" Rihaku asked.

"Nothing. I was just thinking if I can also visit Kokuyou after this," she replied.

"That is not my call to make, but I can pass the message over to Chue, if that's okay?"

"That would be helpful."

Rihaku had a good sense. As soon as they left the prison, he caught hold of a subordinate and had them look for the elusive Chue.

"But I do wonder what on earth Chue-san is up to this time. She even dragged a subordinate of mine into this."

"Is your subordinate Ujun-san?"

"That's the guy. Also, it must have messed around with Master Basen in various ways."

"Yeah." She heard that Ujun was forcibly involved to support his half-sister or something.

"I've no clue as to why, but Ujun's half-sister, the one who was in the inner palace before, the former consort who retired to religion, what was her name again?"

"Lishu-sama."

"Ah, that's right. It seems that consort has returned to the U residence."

"Why?" All sorts of talks have proceeded during the time Maomao was away.

"No idea, but the rumours were that the U family head had strongly requested for it. Apparently the temple where Lishu-sama stayed at was doing all sorts of new things."

"Was it something dangerous?" If Maomao's hypothesis was correct, it had to be the experiment to attenuate the smallpox vaccination.

“Probably. From how things have gone, it seems Lishu-sama had already been allowed to return home.”

The emperor treated Lishu dearly. Her being made to leave the inner palace and retire to religion as well, had been done to prevent her from being treated unjustly.

Her father, who was both her parent and enemy, and her older half-sister had already been expelled from the U family. It should be fine for her to be called back with any reason now. Others might complain about her moving back to her maiden home again, but for Lishu, it was an old matter.

How her future would go will depend on Basen.

While Maomao was deep in thought, they arrived at the medical office.

“Maomao-san, Maomao-san.” The elusive Chue was already standing in front of the medical office.

Rihaku waved goodbye, then returned to his previous job. Maomao bowed her head and headed over to Chue.

“What is it, Chue-san?”

“How did it go?”

“How, you ask. He only has a few days of life left. I probably won’t be able to extend his life even if I were to get involved.”

“Yes. I guess so. He was caught red-handed, so he is clearly a criminal whether he lives or dies. But, it does leave a bad taste in your mouth,” Chue said indifferently. She must have known from the start and sent Maomao over. She didn’t order Maomao to examine or nurse him, which was why Maomao could only look at him.

“Do you know why he stabbed Kokuyou-san, why he acted as the random attackeeer?”

More or less.

Maomao had ended up knowing.

But this was only just speculation.

“It’s so like Maomao-san to say nothing even if you knooow.”

“As you say.”

“Then, shall we go visit Kokuyou-san to verify your answeeer?” Chue pulled Maomao’s hand to urge her.

Chapter 24

Maomao was guided to an estate in the capital. Although she had no idea whose residence it was, it smelt heavily of medicine.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“Court Physician Lao’s hoome,” Chue answered.

Despite its simplicity, the estate had a historical feel.

“Kokuyou got stabbed in the stomach, but he’s conscious and eating heartily. He seemed well, so they had him moved to the capitaaal.”

As he got stabbed, there was no way he could be left in a village that was full of patients. When considering the inquiries to come, moving him to the capital would make things easier. She understood why people would want him quarantined for the moment despite his resistance to smallpox. Since Court Physician Lao has experience with smallpox, his family should also understand the disease.

“He’s been moved here temporarily since Maomao-san and Yo-san were at the clinic.”

Maomao understood the situation.

Court Physician Lao’s family and servants kept their heads down and didn’t move when Maomao and Chue walked past them.

It’s best we don’t greet them—that’s the feel I’m getting.

It was probably better to not get into contact with people involved with smallpox.

They headed for the room at the back.

“Here we are. He’s insiiide.” Chue stopped in front of the room.

“Are you not going in, Chue-san?” Maomao asked.

“Let’s seee, Chue-san would prefer to not have Maomao-san alone with him, but is it fine to join you?”

“…”

Chue was perceptive. She was probably referring to what Maomao would chat about with Kokuyou now.

“Please let me know if there’s anything. The quick and agile Chue-san will come to rescue you, Maomao-saaan.”

“Thank you,” Maomao said, and entered the room alone.

Kokuyou was lying in bed, reading a book.

“Hey,” he said.

“It’s not, hey. I heard you got stabbed.” Maomao said.

“Yup, wanna see the injuryyy?”

“No need. You seem well.”

Kokuyou was the same.

“Just now, I met the person who stabbed Kokuyou,” she said.

“Ahhh, the village head, riiight? His looks changed a lot so I didn’t recognise him at first.”

“He called you a Houkou.”

“A Houkou?” Kokuyou tilted his head in confusion.

“It’s a mythical creature. A parasitic monster that lives in a thousand year old tree.”

“Oh? How is that me?”

Looks like Kokuyou really didn’t know.

Maomao thought she didn’t know either. “Do you know what a Yamabiko is?”

“I know that one. It’s the thing that returns your voice in the mountains, right?”

“If I call the tree spirit, a Kodama (echo), do you understand?”

“Oh yeah, people call it that too, don’t they?” Kokuyou continued to chat with a grin. Maomao didn’t see him as a bad person. Was their first meeting at the docks?

It was Maomao’s group who allowed Kokuyou to board the boat. She remembered how Kokuyou had given motion sickness medicine to Rahan, who had been suffering from seasickness, in return.

When was the next time they met?

Maomao had asked him to watch over the apothecary in Verdigris Mansion since she had been concerned for Sazen. That time, he took it up since she paid him.

And recently, he was able to get a court physician-like job through Maomao’s introduction. Seems like the pay was so good that he was doing a good job.

“You seem to have a good relationship with Yo-san’s family.”

“Yup, Yo and her family were very good to me.”

“So that’s why you vaccinated them against smallpox and taught them all sorts of medical skills.”

“Yup.” Kokuyou put down his book. It seemed to be related to medical skills.

“Then, how were you with the village head and the other villagers who were not nice?” Maomao clenched her fist.

“…I did my best to not associate with theeem.”

“And when they harassed you?”

Kokuyou let out a groan. “Can I not answer? I want to stay friends with Maomao-saan.”

Maomao froze. “Was it you, Kokuyou, who spread smallpox in Yo’s village?”

“Nooo, but you know, I thought I wouldn’t need to pay them back if I was gone. And then, in actual fact, the village head did drive me out.”

Kokuyou did nothing to the villagers. He chose to do nothing as payback. He thought the village head would die as well, but contrary to expectations, the witch doctor survived in addition to Yo’s family.

It wasn't that the village head was lucky. He might have already caught smallpox before. The pockmarks Maomao saw were quite old.

Yamabiko. Kodama. Houkou. She now understood why the village head called Kokuyou that.

Repay kindness with kindness, malice with malice.

That was all there was to it. Like how the mountains would echo back your calls. Like a mirror, he only reflected back the hearts of others.

And that's why he's good at bargaining.

The reason Maomao saw Kokuyou as a good person, was probably because Kokuyou saw her treatment of him as good.

In that case, Maomao could see what happened to people who treated Kokuyou with malice.

"When did Kokuyou catch smallpox?" she asked.

"Over ten years agooo."

"Then, from where did you get the smallpox you used to vaccinate Yo and her family?"

Smallpox scabs were highly infectious, but only for about a year.

Kokuyou cracked a smile, and took off the cloth that covered half his face. His handsome face was dense with pockmarks. "Can you see any other scars aside from the pockmarks?"

"Did you get hit by something?"

"I got hit by a club. The robber stripped me of all of my possessions, you seee." There was no change in his tone. Kokuyou was cheery as usual. "I was lucky it was spring. If it was summer or winter, I think I would've died. I staggered around looking for herbs to staunch the bleeding. And was about near dead when I sought help from a village nearby. They were such nice people. They nursed someone like me back to health. But you know, the other villagers couldn't stand the sight of me and tried to drive me out. That's right. It was because the robber who stole from me was in that group."

As always, the story Kokuyou told light-heartedly was horrible.

"So it was inevitable he got in my way. He pretended to not know me, and tried to chase me out before I recognised him. It was hilarious and amusing, but when he tried to gag me, I paid him back with one thing."

“What sort of payback?”

“I made him into a seedbed.”

Maomao was sharp enough to know not to ask what kind of seedbed he was turned into. In order to lower the risk of the smallpox vaccination, you would need a healthy body and environment that allowed nursing.

Surely a seedbed wouldn’t need such things.

“…I would bring up the topic of mercy, but it was the other person who made the first move.”

“Yup, and I didn’t think the other villagers would hear me out.”

She couldn’t completely dismiss the way Kokuyou did things. However, it seems like he had no restraint.

“Then, did you give the village head of Yo-san’s village payback?”

“I was the one who got stabbed by the village head.”

“No, you did something, right? Otherwise it wouldn’t explain why the village head was that weakened. He probably doesn’t have more than a few days left.” Maomao had her suspicions. The village head had declined so much as to smell of death. He had been trembling, unable to articulate, and hallucinating.

He looked nothing like someone who had the energy to move from the capital to the smallpox village to stab Kokuyou.

He could only have been poisoned.

“The village head made strange fragrances and medicine that he called speeells.”

“Was it ergot?”

“Correct. How did you knooow?”

“The village head’s fingers were necrotic.” She had no idea if Kokuyou administered ergot or a different poison.

“He stabbed me first, so I stuffed the poison he was carrying into his mouth. He served me that many times when I was in the village. My younger brother always told me to do unto others as what had been done unto you.”

“Your younger brother?”

“My younger brother. My twin who died and left me behind.”

It was something she heard before. “You two were inoculated with different smallpox vaccinations for an experiment, is that right?”

“Yup, I was inoculated with human pus, my younger brother with livestock pus. My brother was fine since he got the weak toxin. As you can see for me, mine aggravated and I nearly died.” Kokuyou touched the pockmarks on his right cheek. “My master who raised us was a brilliant doctor. But, he was cowardly and wouldn’t try out the smallpox vaccination without testing it on us first. It was amazing. He’d never caught the disease even though he’d been studying it for years.”

“He probably left all the dangerous work to his disciples,” Maomao said bluntly.

Kokuyou was a peculiar guy. He was neither benevolent nor malevolent. He only reflected the actions of others like a mirror.

And yet, despite his cheery voice, he sounded a little gloomy only when he talked about his younger brother.

“My brother would come save me when I got bullied. That time, my brother would get payback for me even if I didn’t. So, I had to get payback too, so I…” Kokuyou put his hands together. “…switched the animal pus meant for my master into human pus.”

“…” Maomao gulped.

“My master contracted the serious smallpox. He was in so much grief over the failure of the smallpox vaccination he tested on so many of his disciples that he also burned his research findings, and got weaker and weaker. My brother put him out of his suffering.”

Kokuyou wasn’t dragging out his words as usual.

“My brother died afterwards. Killed himself. Probably because I told him that I switched the smallpox vaccination.” Kokuyou clenched his fist and bowed his head. He seemed to be repenting. “I should’ve lied. I should’ve told him that the experiment failed, should’ve covered it up with a look of innocence.”

“Can you lie to a mirror?” she asked.

Kokuyou shook his head. “I had my brother with me since forever, so I didn’t know what I should do afterwards.”

Hence Kokuyou could only be a mirror, reflecting the kindness or malice from others.

“…What will Maomao do to me?”

“…” The goosebumps had yet to settle. Maomao had thoughts regarding the human called Kokuyou. She probably wouldn’t be able to get along with him in the way she used to.

Then, she shouldn’t have tried to expose him, but she needed to understand the kind of person he was.

A Houkou-like man.

It was as the village head said.

Kokuyou was harmless to harmless people, harmful to harmful people.

Hence the village head deemed that Kokuyou was someone who needed to be dealt with, if not killed.

“One question,” she said.

“Whaaat?”

“Was the village head truly a good-for-nothing?”

“Hmmm, I wonder? At least, he did manage the village well up until the spread of smallpox.”

Right, Maomao thought. The children at Yo’s home had listened to the village head when he came.

“What I did is certainly dangerous, so I understand why he told me to stop. He was the one who spearheaded the harassment.”

Maomao had no idea what kind of person the village head was. However, she understood a little of how he thought of Kokuyou.

I think it’s unfair.

Kokuyou could cure a disease that couldn’t be cured by spells. Kokuyou treated people so they wouldn’t contract smallpox.

Hence, despite his hate for Kokuyou, the village head copied him. He tried to perform smallpox vaccinations on children. The smallpox scabs from years ago were equivalent to being non-infectious. But, unfortunately due to a child who got infected, it led to this disaster.

For what he did for the people, he was treated as a random attacker, chased around, and as a result, he must have hated Kokuyou so much.

Ahh, what should I do?

The fact that the village head was a criminal didn't change.

Even if what Kokuyou had done was a crime, it was now too late to charge him.

Above anything else, from now on, Kokuyou would be a useful person in medicine.

But I don't want to categorise people as useful or useless.

Maomao had a sly personality.

Chue had probably heard this entire conversation. If so, she could only offload it all to the other woman.

"I pray that Kokuyou will only be surrounded by good people," she said.

"Praying is unlike Maomaooo."

Maomao waved and left the room.

Chue was outside the room. She bounced to her feet and her hair swept up. "Anything to report?"

"Not really."

"That's a pity." Chue followed after Maomao. "Maomao-san, you look tired. How about we go out for dinner today?"

"I don't feel like it."

"Pity."

The uneasy feeling continued to plague Maomao.